THE

BLACKHALL GHOSTS

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CHAPTER I.

'GOOD-BYE!'

'GOOD-BYE, holly-bush and old gate! Good-bye, moor; for I'll never see you again!'

The speech sounds childish, and, save for a certain solemnity and sternness in the second half of the sentence, it might have been uttered by a child. But it was no child, not even a childish young woman, who said the words.

The speaker was a well-grown, well-built girl of nineteen or twenty years of age, with good features, a profusion of dark brown hair, dark grey eyes, and a brilliant complexion. She would have been decidedly handsome in as plain a stuff dress as a young lady could wear had it not been for a half-sullen, half-defiant expression, which agreed ill with what was naturally frank and open in the face, and robbed it of all softness and sweetness.

The good-bye which Joanna Endicott had given, half aloud, was wrung from her by a desperate resolution, taken under desperate circumstances.

She was standing, on a fine October day, midway between the door of her father's house and the garden gate, not many yards distant from the house. It was one of those old country houses, half manor-house, half farmhouse, of which Devonshire has many. The place had some pretensions because of its very homely antiquity; but, instead of the air of comfort and plenty which ought to have distinguished the dwelling of a yeoman squire before bad times had become chronic, it showed many tokens of neglect, and of what was probably narrow means.

The tall privet hedge, which was all that divided the small front garden from a country road, was straggling, ragged, and broken down in one or two places. A sundial and a curiously constructed stack of variegated holly had formed the central

ornaments of a grass-plot bordered with superannuated sweet-briar, honeysuckle, and lilac bushes—the last sturdy survivors of more choice and delicate shrubs. The iron nose of the sun-dial was broken off. The holly-bush, after it had been kept carefully clipped in prosaic rotundity for many a year, had latterly been left to its own devices, and had exercised its liberty in two ways. A degenerate shoot of the ordinary dark green holly had usurped the place of eminence, and surmounted the stiff round of the variegated holly with a wildly luxuriant bush, stretching out adventurous branches, as thickly studded with red berries at Christmas as if the original plant had never known the severe discipline of gardeners' shears. That vagabond holly-bush was like a flag of surrender, a sign of the abandonment of old dignity and decorum at Blackhall.

By the rustic brown porch and the grey mullioned windows the eldest of the fuchsia tribe in England kept its ground, as tall as a small tree, full of slim boughs, bearing dark green thick-set leaves, and a countless abundance of gem-like little flowers, which shone like rubies in the summer sunshine, and still made a brave attempt at a ruddy glow in their sheltered nook in October. The old fuchsia did more than keep its ground: it had instituted a couple of irregular hedges running along the two outer sides of the porch. These fuchsia hedges were swept bare every autumn, and in severe winters had been killed to the ground; but they revived in spring, and grew apace to make up for the chances of war.

On the right hand of Blackhall lay the village of Oxcleeve, amidst arable fields now bare. On the left stretched one of the great south-western moors, wave on wave, tor on tor, purple and golden a little while ago, brown, moss-green, grey where the rock came to the surface, and rusty red with bracken at this moment, till it passed into the dim and misty distance. The broken links of a white thread diversified the monotony of the dark moor just below Blackhall. The thread was the river Bar, which had a cleeve, a few spinneys, and half a dozen pools or meres all to itself. For anything else which this corner of the moor could show, there were occasional groups and rows of trees —firs or birches—wind-tossed and gnarled; a packman's bridge; farther off an ancient cross, which required the learned to recognise that it was a cross at all; and at a still greater distance several huge blocks of lichen-covered stone standing on end. The presence and position of the last were attributed to those useful persons the Druids, as the Romans were out of count in this instance, and there were no other architects to whom the unaccountable, not altogether inhuman shape and attitude of the stones could be plausibly assigned.

To people who did not care for moorland scenery, Blackhall and its surroundings, including the primitive village at its elbow, were bleak and desolate in the extreme. To those on whom the

solemn subtle charm of the wilderness had a strong grip, which nothing could relax and nothing could rival, the landscape was nearly perfect of its kind.

Yet the good-bye for ever to Blackhall was said voluntarily by a girl who had been born and reared there, and had hardly left the neighbourhood in the whole course of her life; the very one of all its daughters, of the various families to which the old house had belonged, since it was built in another age and another England, who had probably loved it best, with a passionate attachment made up of the threefold strands of three different motives. She was a creature for whom, under any conditions, a great moor, or a great mountain, or the wide sea would have had a strong attraction. This moor was her birthplace. She had little else to care for and be proud of. But, in spite of everything, the words were spoken with dry eyes and a hard-set mouth.

The next minute the speaker, Joanna Endicott, turned and walked into the house. Beyond the threshold, the evidence of care and attention withdrawn, and of the necessary means no longer spent to stop the progress of decay and keep the house in tolerable repair, was much more conspicuous. Outside, the solid masonry of former generations offered a strong passive resistance to the assaults of time in summer's sun and winter's storm, while Nature's kindly touch and healing growth hid many a breach. But within the house the walls of the hall were mildewed and mouldering. Spiders were spinning their webs in the corners. The canvases of several worthless old pictures were starting from their frames. The contents of sundry boxes which had contained stuffed birds had degenerated into bird-skeletons together with some handfuls of feathers and dust. One of the high lattice windows on either side of the door was broken, and the shattered diamond panes were replaced by nothing better than a wooden board. The waxcloth which covered the stone floor was cracked and rent, and where it had not broken into holes presented a network of coarse threads—a trap for unwary feet. The staircase of oak, black with age, had more than one unsightly gap where the twisted rails ought to have been.

Both dining-room and drawing-room opened from the hall. Joanna entered the latter. It was a faded, soiled, dispiriting room, which had been last furnished with the showy finery that was in fashion twenty years before. Hangings and carpet had lost their gay colours, and were stained and worn with not overcareful or gentle usage. Mirrors and china were cracked, with feet and handles wanting. Gilding was dim and dirty. The springs of a chair here and a sofa there had given way, while the cushions were crushed flat as if they had not been shaken up for a period of years. Lounges and couches, originally intended to be elegant and luxurious, no longer retained claims to common respectability or to imparting ordinary ease to those

persons who were so unfortunate as to sit down on them. A footstool had been kicked over without having been set on its feet again, and held up to public scorn a fractured leg and the side of its cover in a fringe of rags.

Three additional touches were lent to the domestic desolation. There was not the vestige of a book or of needlework to be seen. The fire was smouldering in an ill-cleaned grate, above a heap of ashes. Some flower-jars, which had had autumn flowers put into them a week before, stood with what ought to have been their fresh and fragrant contents withered and drooping. A more hopeless, heartless room than the drawing-room at Blackhall at this date could not well be imagined.

Those who knew the house and the history of its owner were aware that both he and it were going to destruction with long swift strides. Still it was in the natural order of things that the women's quarters should look more wrecked and dismal than the man's, richly as he deserved the worst locality that could fall to his lot. The furniture in the dining-room had been, like the house itself, made to last. Compared to it, that of the drawing-room had been flimsy and garish. It would have required still more rough daily usage and violent habits of spurning a table in this direction and pitching a chair in that to have worked much mischief to the three-piled Brussels carpet, the heavy mahogany, the strong leather, and the thick cloth. As one result of this sliding scale of ruin at Blackhall, Hugh Endicott had long ago abandoned the drawing-room to the use of the women of the family, who had almost no visitors. He never put a foot in it except on particular occasions.

It was enough to provoke a shiver to think of a young woman, with every token of health and strength in her blooming face and erect firm gait, in such a wretched, neglected room, for which the humblest cottage, where the floor was clean-swept and the hearth bright, would have been a blessed change.

Joanna Endicott did not seem to notice anything wrong with the cheerless room. She acted as if her mind were too full of something else for her to see the inanimate objects around her. Yet as she passed one of the jars with the withered flowers, she plucked, consciously or unconsciously, a sprig of rosemary from the nosegay and pressed it between her fingers, while she walked straight to the only person present and prepared to address her. This was a woman hardly past her prime, who sat sunk in a low rocking-chair, tilting it mechanically backwards and forwards on one side of the hearth, with an indescribably monotonous and oppressive movement.

The figure was as sad to see as the room; for it would have been difficult to discover a more pitiable prime of womanhood than that which was, not to say displayed, but kept huddled in the background by Mrs. Hugh Endicott. She looked more like

a beaten dog than a chidden and punished child. She could never have borne the slighthest resemblance to her daughter Joanna. Mother and daughter differed at every point. The mother had always been a little woman, and had become shrunken before her time. The daughter was tall and broad-shouldered for her years. Mrs. Endicott's was a weak face—so weak that the absence of all power in it might have been some excuse for many of her faults. Joanna Endicott's was a strong face, whether for good or evil. Those who had known the old family at Blackhall said she was a true Endicott, while she took not so much after her father as after his sisters and aunts, who had all died or left the place long before. Where the girl of nineteen had an abundance of richly tinted nut-brown hair—nut-brown where the nut is at its darkest—the woman of forty had a scanty crop of hair between flaxen and golden in hue, which time and trouble had obstinately refused either to darken or whiten. Poor Mrs. Endicott! it was a minor misfortune; but there is no doubt there was something inappropriate and unbecoming—something almost derogatory to the woman and her history—in that wisp of pale golden hair, which would neither grow discreetly dull in tint, nor become, with pathetic prematureness, shot with silver. Its owner had not the sense to dispose of it under any save the smallest and least shrouding of caps; and it must have done her positive harm in the eyes of susceptible, dogmatic people. There was something light-headed in the golden hair of a woman of forty—a woman with a most unhappy history, and a heavily clouded reputation, which nothing on earth would ever clear. There is a touch of the irony of fate when conditions over which we have no control convert what was once a cherished and acknowledged boon into a source of detriment and loss. There had been a time when Mrs. Endicott's pale golden hair—a little more luxuriant in those days—had been considered, alike by herself and her neighbours, one of her greatest attractions, when it was quite in keeping with her girlish delicacy of complexion and her coy blue eyes. It was that very hair and those eyes which had won the roving fancy of Hugh Endicott of Blackhall, though he had lived to curse what he had come to reckon the meretricious yellow colour of the one and the false furtive glances of the other.

If Mrs. Hugh Endicott had been a pretty, lively young woman, in rather a childish, giddy way, she was anything save a handsome bountiful matron as she approached middle age. She was a shaken, scared, half-spent creature where she lay back clutching at the arms of the rocking-chair. Her cheeks were pinched; her weak eyes were dim with many a long day of weariness and despair. Her mouth, in which several of what had once been the small white teeth were either broken or gone, leaving dreary gaps like the missing rails in the staircase, was the very picture of forlornness and fright. Her pallid face

had no colour, unless in the streaks and patches of broken red which emotions of terror and shame brought there.

Mrs. Endicott's dress did nothing to improve her appearance. Like the furniture in the room, it was far past its best; and that, too, had been a smart and showy best, which looked doubly ill in the sere and yellow leaf. Her gown was of the stiff flowered silk called Pompadour, the design of which was gay little groups of red, white, purple, and yellow flowers in satin, on a darker silk ground; and it had been profusely trimmed with lace. At this date the stiffness of the material was lost in innumerable crumples and creases; the satin flowers were frayed past recognition, and the holes of the lace had magnified themselves into yawning vacancies, which had no place in the pattern. The jaunty cap in its smoked batteredness was a melancholy ghost of what it ought to have been.

Mrs. Hugh Endicott had not been either wise or good, else she could hardly have come to the pass at which she had arrived; but even in proportion to the offence the punishment had been terrible. Her history can be summed up in a few words; the torture of it, as she continued, poor creature though she was, capable of natural feeling, no language can express.

She had married, when a silly frivolous girl, a man rather above her in status; for she was only the daughter of a captain in the coastguard, and her husband was Hugh Endicott of Blackhall—a squire, no doubt, of land won from the moor for the most part, whose acres were more numerous than fertile, still a squire of good descent; and if he was not rich, neither was he then poverty-stricken.

She was foolish and vain, fond of the idle gaiety she had known as a girl in a seaport and garrison town, which she could no longer hope to command, and of the half-shallow, half-coarse admiration that a woman of a more robust nature or a finer mind would have despised. She hated the moor district, when she came to know it better, with a half-childish hatred not unmixed with shivering fear. She was also extravagant in a number of senseless petty personal extravagances—peculiarly exasperating in their very pettiness and selfishness to a man soon struggling with a millstone of debt round his neck.

He was a man of hot temper and stormy passions. It was in him from the first to be relentlessly, barbarously cruel, given a certain amount of provocation.

Still he had married her from choice, and love of a sort. He was not a monster. He still cared in his vehement, fitful, tyrannical fashion for the children she had borne him, long after he had ceased to care for her. He had some respect for his character, though he had been styled 'wild Endicott' even when he was a lad. He did mind the opinion of the world for more than one decade of his later life; and it was just possible that if he had been tolerably prosperous, or even anything

save horribly unfortunate, the couple might have pulled along together; wrangling continually, so far as shrill hysterical protests alternating with cowardly evasions and cunning deceptions could be called wrangling on her part; falling out more furiously by way of variety now and then; but never coming to any direct rupture or open scandal. But Hugh Endicott speculated in cattle, sheep, and little moor-bred horses, in new manures for new land, even in the last remains of the metals of the ancients still to be found in these localities. He failed disastrously in all. His misfortunes, which he had neither acquired principle nor natural patience to bear, and, bearing like a man, to grow twice a man by the stern experience, goaded him to madness. He grew always more of a bully and tyrant both at home and abroad, but especially at home, till his tyranny was not only hateful but intolerable to an erring woman not made of the stuff of which saints and martyrs are made.

She also was baited to madness, till she was about to take a step as reckless, and if possible more wicked than any of which her husband had been guilty. She planned to break God's law and man's by fleeing from her husband, forsaking her children, and abandoning the path of virtue on earth and the hope of heaven hereafter. She brought herself to the brink of an elopement with a rascally old admirer of hers, who had sunk from more genteel callings to end as an officer in the excise. He had been sent to Oxcleeve to check illicit practices for which the moor afforded facilities, and there he had once more come across an early flame. He was reduced in circumstances like herself, and had no more attractive game to pursue. He was so low in his fortunes and discontented with his shabby lot that he did not much care what befell him, while he had a keen relish for notoriety. He persuaded himself that he was very sorry for the badly treated wife and downtrodden woman whom he had ogled, with whom he had flirted when she was chattering, dancing Cecilia Lowndes—light-hearted enough, poor thing. He knew that there would be a certain shady *éclat* in coming to the rescue (!) of Mrs. Endicott of Blackhall and running away with her.

The evil deed was frustrated in the doing. The purpose of the pair became known to Hugh Endicott. Before Mrs. Endicott had gone many hundred yards from home on such an errand, in the dawn of a summer morning of all times, before she had joined Jack Morgan at their rendezvous, she came face to face with the husband on whom she was about to inflict a deadly injury. He stopped her, charging her with the sin she had meditated, which, in spite of her guilt, she could not deny. He brought her back, a disgraced and terrified culprit, to the shelter of his roof.

He did not put her away afterwards; he did not take her

children from her. Yet either course would have been infinitely more merciful than that which he adopted. There was not a day on which she came into his presence that he did not remind her of what he had saved her from, in order to drag her through the bitter waters of his accusations and reproaches. He taunted her before her children, from whom she shrank painfully abashed; before her servants, to whom she was an object of a little pity and a great scorn. He would have taunted her before her visitors also, but, as no attempt had been made to hide the ugly episode in the family history, no visitors for Mrs. Endicott came any more to Blackhall. Her very relations, who were at least respectable, whom she had affronted, did not take her part, but left her to her miserable fate.

Mrs. Endicott's accomplice in wrong-doing, on whom Hugh Endicott had not sought to wreak his revenge, because, as he had assured his wife, she was too worthless a possession for the chance of her loss to be revenged, had been removed in the natural course of his service from Oxcleeve, and was stationed at some distance, from which, though he brazened out his share of the offence, he was rarely seen or heard of in the neighbourhood of Blackhall.

It did seem as if the woman were abandoned both by God and man; but the depth of her degradation raised for her a human helper—surely the faint shadow of a divine Deliverer.

CHAPTER II.

A PARTING.

MRS. ENDICOTT was the mother of four living children, with long gaps between the ages of some of them, caused by the deaths of other children born to her and Hugh Endicott, whose pale still faces, and hands and feet for ever at rest, had not established peace between the father and mother, bereaved in common; neither had they prevented her from bringing on the unconscious little ones, where they lay in their graves, the reproach that attends on the children of a wanton mother. The eldest of the surviving children was Joanna, born and bred at Blackhall. The second, Jem, was a boy of twelve, for whom Hugh Endicott had shown a degree of consideration. The boy had not been made a frequent witness to the abasement of his mother. He had been sent off to school and kept there, not always returning even for the holidays during the last five years. His father went to see him at long intervals; his mother, or, for that matter, the rest of the family, never. The prohibition was one of the scorpions with which Mrs. Endicott was lashed; for she had been fond of her only son, and it was hard for her to think that she was seldom to set eyes on his

face till he and she had grown strange to each other, till he had learnt in all probability to wince at the thought of his mother. The two younger children were little girls still, not more than six and seven, in blessed ignorance of the blight on their home. Mrs. Endicott might have had some pride and pleasure in their rosy beauty, merry pranks, and fondling caresses, if she had not been crushed and smitten beyond taking pride and pleasure in anything. Besides, here too Hugh Endicott interposed and stripped life of all compensation to her. After his bearish fashion he made pets of his younger children. And he not only chose to stand first with them: he would not suffer even a slender share of their notice and regard to be withdrawn from them, and wasted, as he reckoned, on their mother. He confiscated such dolls and sweets as she had found means to bestow on the children, and made it a condition of his favour that they should have nothing to do with her. He encouraged their nurse to tell tales which would expose and prevent Mrs. Endicott's interference in the nursery which she had once ruled. Little Celia obeyed her father to the letter, and broke away from her mother every time they were together; but Lucy, though she had a secret dread of her father, slipped away and hung about her 'own mamma' whenever she had the opportunity.

Had they not been mother and daughter, it would have been natural for a girl like Joanna Endicott to recoil from such a woman as her mother—to have done more than recoil; to have judged and condemned her harshly. But she was her mother, and that, in the circumstances, meant much.

Joanna was not like other girls, she herself reflected with a sore and swelling heart; for had not the knowledge of evil with its end, which was death, and its fruit, which was ashes, been forced upon her in what ought to have been her tenderly shielded days, and made her old before her time? The knowledge in its entirety might be a saving knowledge; but it felt to her as if it were burnt in upon her consciousness, on her very bearing, like a terrible brand.

But along with the knowledge she had a keen sense of the penalty exacted. She had grown up grievously familiar with the insults and injuries heaped upon the sinner; and in this case familiarity had not bred contempt, or even indifference. On the contrary, it had given birth to a passionate yearning to protect and deliver the weak and oppressed.

Joanna was strong herself—strong in her youth and vigour, and in a nature totally different from her mother's—if it must be said, derived in part from her father's before his had run riot and deteriorated fearfully, sinking to a lower level than that to which his victims had fallen, since the stronger has the greater capacity for evil as for everything else. All that was generous in Joanna's strength was stirred to rise up in defence of the downtrodden and desolate, of the mother who had borne

her, with regard to whom Joanna had the anguish of seeing her every day humbled in the dust, and that before her young daughter, before the little ignorant children Celia and Lucy.

The girl was full of indignant pity for her mother even while she tried Joanna, as Mrs. Endicott had tried everybody with whom she had been connected, by her folly, fickleness, and cowardice.

Where Joanna failed in charity was towards her father. For him she had nothing save indignant condemnation, rising at times into fierceness, in a temper not wholly dissimilar from what his had been. She ignored all relenting on his part where she was concerned. She resented and rejected every overture to such indulgence as he had in his power to grant her, which now and then he made to her. She was not likely to reject such advances long; Hugh Endicott, even in his youth, would not have stood many repulses.

If Joanna made great mistakes, and was in her turn intolerant and unmerciful, there is this to be said for her: she was very young, and she had nobody to put confidence in, nobody to advise her; she was as lonely a girl as was in England.

When Joanna Endicott came forward to her mother on this October afternoon the girl's voice and manner were not those of an ordinary daughter to an ordinary mother, happy, though they may not know it, in the simplicity of their relations. The tone and manner were, in fact, those of the superior and not of the inferior, the ruler instead of the ruled. For Mrs. Endicott had thrown down her motherly as well as her wifely rights on that ill-fated summer morning when she had stolen from her husband's house not meaning to return to it, but designing to relinquish everything which ought to have been dearest to her, and to fling herself into such arms as those of the low scapegrace Jack Morgan.

But there was no unkindness in Joanna's accent of authority. There was even an effort at gentleness—a quality which at this period of her life did not come by any means readily to an inmate of Blackhall whose usual frame of mind was one of hot wrath and breathless impatience.

'Mother,' said Joanna, 'you are ready?—you have promised. I have settled everything: we are to go to-night.'

'Oh, Anna, I cannot do it!' said the woman, shivering and trembling. 'It was all very well to speak of doing it when it was at a distance, but when it comes to the point I cannot. I tried to go once before, and you know—you know what came of it.' And she hung her dishonoured head, with its unsuitable scanty yellow hair like a mockery, as she remembered the guilt she had agreed to, and the retribution which had dogged her heels.

'But this is altogether different,' said Joanna, turning aside

her head and flushing hotly. She spoke half vehemently, half wearily; for the argument was unanswerable to herself, and she had gone over it many times with the same opponent. 'There is nothing wrong in what we are going to do—at least, if there is anything with which people who know nothing of the circumstances can find fault, we are forced to do it. There is no other way. You are going with me, mother?'

'That is just it, Anna,' declared Mrs. Endicott, sitting up, and speaking with an amount of energy in her plaintiveness which converted it into peevishness. 'Why should you go? I have no right to take you without his consent, and you know he would never give it. You owe duty to him as well as to me. Oh, he will never let you forget that—trust him for that; and he will hunt you to the ends of the earth till he has caught you and dragged you back.' She ended a little wildly, pulling out her handkerchief—a torn one—and fanning herself with it, though the fire was nearly out, and the day was cold, with a suspicion of frost in the moorland air.

'But you cannot go without me; you can never manage by yourself,' remonstrated Joanna with an air of bewilderment, though she was generally clear-headed.

'Never mind me,' said her mother feverishly. 'I don't want to have your ruin to answer for as well as my own. Blackhall is a poor home—I have sometimes been tempted to think it a hell upon earth; but it is better than no home, and it need not be so bad for you as it has been for me. He has no charge to bring against you, unless that you have had some pity and affection for your miserable mother, and surely that may be forgiven you in time. If I were gone, and you did not know where I was, he would not even have that complaint to bring against you. He used to be fond and proud of you when you were a child and a half-grown girl; I believe he is to this day, if you would only let him. I know the world, Anna,' continued Mrs. Endicott, with a poor little assumption of superior worldly wisdom that sat strangely on what was otherwise so cowed and scared in her aspect. 'You may depend upon it that it is one thing to enter life the daughter of Endicott of Blackhall, though he has squandered his means and been no better than a ruffian to me, and another thing to face the world disowned and cast off by him, as good as the daughter of nobody.'

'What do I care for being the daughter of Endicott of Blackhall?' broke in Joanna indignantly. 'It is no honour; it is a disgrace. Is this a place to be proud of?' and she looked round her with aversion and disgust. 'Do you think I would touch an article of his if I could help myself? I tell you I hate to put my hands on anything that belongs to him—on his chairs, tables, or on his flowers, even to set them right. I would not so much as poke his fire if I got my choice.'

'Oh, hush, hush, for Heaven's sake!' cried her mother, with her head falling still farther back, and her lips farther apart, putting up shaking hands as if she would cover her ears.

'Are you afraid of his hearing me?' demanded Joanna, with a smile that had more ghastliness than gladness in it on the soft red lips. 'I don't care if he did; it would bring matters to a crisis.'

'Girl!' gasped Mrs. Endicott, 'that is not the worst. He is your father, whatever he is. There are words in the Bible about the eagles tearing out the eyes of the unnatural children who curse father or mother.'

'I have not cursed him,' said Joanna sullenly. 'Whatever he may deserve, I only ask him to let you and me alone—to let us go away altogether where he will never find us again. But, mother, there is something you are hiding from me: what is it?' cried Joanna, suddenly turning upon Mrs. Endicott and fixing her shifting eyes with her own steady gaze. Then every shade of colour fled, and left Joanna's face as white as a sheet. She set her teeth hard, and even ground them for an instant as her father might have done in her place. 'Is it possible,' she said in a low voice, whose vibrating tones nevertheless cut the hearer's ears like sharp steel, 'that you are thinking again of that detestable man, that scamp and scoundrel? Would you give up me, your daughter, for him, and take his company instead of mine? Mother, contradict me on the spot; swear that it is not true, else I will never speak to you again.'

'Anna, be quiet!' moaned Mrs. Endicott, throwing up her wan thin hands again, this time as if to ward off a blow. 'Do not look so like your father, or else you will frighten me out of my wits—out of what wits I have left. What right have you to say such horrible things to me, your mother? Ah me! he (your father) has shown you the example all these years, and you have learnt to copy it: though I do not say that you have not been good to me—a good girl,' murmured Mrs. Endicott, with a furtive frightened glance into her daughter's face. 'But you might know,' she began anew in a weak complaining manner, 'that though I were to hear again—to be brought once more in contact with the other——' She stopped, quailing before her daughter's look.

'Mother, you *have* heard,' said Joanna; 'he has had the abominable insolence to address you again! How did you hear? Where is the letter? What did you do with it?'

'Well, if you will have it, I burnt it,' said Mrs. Endicott in an anti-climax, over which there was no one to laugh, for Joanna was in no laughing mood, and in fact the speaker began to weep copiously. 'How could I help his writing or finding a messenger to deliver his letter? He wrote nothing that the whole world might not have read, only that he was sorry for me, as I am sure I may well be for myself. The greatest enemy

I ever had might pity me; and though he wrote, that was not to say that I answered him. I do not know that he meant any further harm; he has done me enough already; and if you could only understand, I loathe the very mention of his name. But you are hard, hard, Anna, like all the rest.'

'I'll not be hard, mother, if you'll go with me to-night,' said Joanna more quietly. 'There's more reason now than ever. Only try me and see how good I'll be. I've money that George Fielding got for me by the sale of my old pony's two colts. My father gave her to me when I was a child. He has never disputed my right to sell her colts. He heard me speaking to George about them last week, and did not interfere. It is not stealing from him to take and use the money; but some day I may be able to repay it, and I will—every farthing. In the meantime it will take us as far as Bristol, where we'll find the 'City of London,' the emigrant ship, in which we are to have the next thing to a free passage, for I have written to the agent and heard from him again. It is all arranged. We are to get to America, where emigrants are wanted, fortunately. Nobody will know anything about us there, and I am able to work for you.'

'We'll starve!' cried Mrs. Endicott in shrill despair.

'Nonsense, mother! I'm young and strong—you've no idea how strong,' exclaimed Joanna, with something like girlish eagerness. 'I walked all the way to Ashford and back again before lunch to get the landlord of the "Three Foxes" to send a post-chaise in the dusk. Not all the way, but as far as Lydgate Spinney. I dared not bid him bring it any nearer, and you can walk as far as that. Even as it was, the man I spoke to looked surprised; but I paid him the fare beforehand from the money George Fielding had brought over and given me at breakfast-time. When the stable-boy still looked at me I am afraid I implied what was not true, to mislead him. It is the first time I ever really tried to deceive anybody,' said Joanna with a blending of girlish pride and remorse. 'I remarked that I hoped the moon would be out, and that it would be a fine day for the manœuvres at Kingscombe to-morrow, so that if he thought anybody was stealing a march he might fancy it was only to see the review.'

'I used to go to the Kingscombe review when it was a pretty sight,' said Mrs. Endicott in a lamentable voice, out of keeping with her commonplace words. 'But if you carry out your mad project—and I have no power to resist you—we'll starve—that's what it is,' she whimpered. 'What can two poor women do alone in a strange country? I have heard over and over again of women being starved and put out of the way. You were always so headstrong and masterful.'

'Never mind; somebody must be masterful. Can you not trust me to work for us both? I shall not mind what I do, and work is well paid for out there.'

'What can you do, Joanna?' her mother put it to her mournfully.

'Oh, numbers of things,' insisted Joanna. 'I can teach young children. I have been teaching Celia and Lucy. I can sew and knit tolerably. I dare say I could serve in a shop.'

Mrs. Endicott groaned, and Joanna laughed a short laugh.

'I'll keep you—if not like a queen, at least better than you are kept here. We'll be free and together—think of that!'

The thought did not seem to stimulate Mrs. Endicott. She was clearly casting about in her mind for another obstacle which she might bring forward. 'How can you ask me to leave my children, Anna?' She caught at the idea, and appealed afresh to her daughter. 'My two baby girls—dear little Celia and Lucy—you might have guessed that my love for them—a mother's love for her little ones, her youngest pets—should outweigh every other consideration in the end. How could you think that I should go away to America while they were to stay behind?'

Joanna stood silent. She might have thought, 'You consented to leave your children before, when they were in still greater need of your care. You proposed to cut yourself off from them, and Jem and me, yet more hopelessly than I am suggesting to you to do now. It is not you; it is I who ought to pause and think, before I abandon my poor little sisters, and Jem at school, and all that I have known of a home, for you.' It is likely enough that she thought all this, for she was a straightforward, truthful girl in her very thoughts; but she did not say it.

Mrs. Endicott sought to deepen the impression which she supposed she had made on her daughter. 'I tried to bring myself to give up my children—indeed I did, Joanna—to please you. I tried them, too, pretty dears! I watched and watched this morning till that girl Sally was out of the nursery, and then I went up. I coaxed Celia to stand still, and I took my Lucy on my knee. I said, "How should you like if I were to go away from you, my loves?" Celia cried in her merry way, "You can't; you are too stupid an old thing." But Lucy hugged me and bade me not go away, till my heart was fit to break.'

'How could you,' cried Joanna indignantly, 'when you knew it was risking everything? Fortunately it is too late to do more mischief, mother.' She resumed more calmly if a little coldly, 'You must be aware that you are parted from Celia and Lucy, as it is, in the most disastrous, most cruel fashion; that they are growing up in a house divided against itself—which is the worst thing possible for them. I know what it is, and you see what it has done to me,' she said without any show of emotion. 'Anything is better than that. If you really care for them more than for yourself, you will leave them. To go is the only way to save both them and you.'

'No, no,' protested Mrs. Endicott, wringing her helpless

hands. 'Let me stay where I am. It is not so bad as never to see Celia and Lucy again, as I hardly ever see my boy—never even to hear of them as I hear of him. It is not so bad as for you and me to be drowned, or starved, or killed by wild Indians.'

'I think I should prefer to be starved or killed at once,' said Joanna with ominous composure; 'and we'll not stay where we are: it is less to be borne now than ever.'

Mrs. Endicott was prevented from answering, for the door opened and admitted a rare visitor to that room. Hugh Endicott entered.

His wife and daughter not only stopped talking; they fell apart, as most people do when the absent person, interested in the discussion which is going on without him, suddenly appears on the scene. But the two women fell apart after a different fashion. Mrs. Endicott shrank back in her rocking-chair, recommencing involuntarily its dreary monotonous rocking. Joanna walked to the hearth-rug, and stood there, tall, upright, and immovable. She would not greet her father; neither would she leave her mother, in her present strait, to his tender mercies.

Hugh Endicott had been considered a fine-looking man in his youth. Indeed, there were old people living who still maintained that when he and his newly wedded wife first took their places in the Blackhall pew in Oxcleeve Church, there was not a nicer looking or better matched pair to be seen there—he so big and strapping; she so small and genteel, with pretty feminine airs and graces.

He was big still and burly; but every feature and attribute had grown coarse, hard, and reckless to the verge of brutality. His nose, his lips, his very fingers, had thickened and broadened. His high colour had deepened to crimson; his hair was heavily grizzled. His old bold, self-asserting glance had passed into a defiant scowl. In his rough suit and gaiters he had the air of one of the worst-looking of the moor-men—who might also be a fugitive from justice, a smuggler or illicit distiller, a criminal on his own account. Hugh Endicott might well have passed on any stage for the ruffian his wife said he was to her. Yet he had been a man of birth and education, for a native of the wilds. The great moors of Devonshire remained in some measure wilds twenty or thirty years ago. If their annals are ransacked examples of ruder characters than Hugh Endicott may be found among their gentry, among their very clergy, though no doubt the quintessence of such Ishmaelitish men and of their lawless deeds dates further back still. Hugh Endicott was comparatively tamed.

He advanced straight to Mrs. Endicott as Joanna had done, but with another purpose. In the first place, he ordered her with an oath to stop the idiotic rocking of her beastly cradle of

a chair. A charming innocent baby she was, to be sure, with that moulted yellow mop of a head of hers, and those holes in her mouth! She obeyed with piteous quivering haste that defeated its object and kept the chair vibrating for some seconds in spite of her, as if she had refused to comply with his will.

He stood for another instant glaring at her before he began the attack he had come there to make. 'You had better listen to what I've got to say,' he said at last, in his thick hoarse voice, 'and I advise you to lay it to heart. I've heard that scum of rascals and thieves Morgan has been in Oxcleeve lately, and that he had the infernal audacity to show himself on the road to Blackhall. I warn you that if there are any more vile communications passing between you and him I'll murder you both—him first, and you next. I'll shoot him like the dog he is, and I'll have you carted out to the moor to perish alone of cold and hunger. That will not suit your fine lady ways and turn for society. I don't care though I'm hung for it.'

'Hugh Endicott!' her thin voice rose almost into a shriek, 'how can you, how dare you, use such barbarous threats without cause? When was I last in society? I have not set eyes on the man you mention for all these five miserable years.'

'Prevarication, as usual,' he said, with a sneer. 'You were always a clever hand at that trick, though not very bright at any honest occupation. I never said you had seen the villain—I'll take care of that, since you're Mrs. Endicott still. I said you were in league with him again—hearing from him, writing to him. Is that plain enough?'

'I have not written to him, Hugh—I'll swear that.'

'What? You'll take your Bible oath upon it? That is the common refuge of women like you. It is easily said, but unfortunately the saying it is of little account where you are concerned.'

'If you do not believe me, Anna will tell you——'

'Woman, do you appeal to your daughter on such a point?' he cried, with disgust that nearly choked him, and then he fell back into his former tone. 'You'll mind what you are about, Mrs. Endicott. If not, I'll perhaps astonish your weak nerves. I'll show you what I can dare. We all know what you would not have scrupled to do years ago, if I had not been before you.'

With the final brutal taunt he left her writhing, sobbing, and cowering in her chair.

As he was about to pass out of the room his eye caught sight of his daughter Joanna standing like stone upon the hearth-rug. He had been vaguely sensible of her presence before, but he had not realised how she looked. In place of increasing his rage, something in her aspect so ungirlish, so paralysed by shame and pain, not for herself, touched one of the few soft spots left in his heart, and melted him where that was concerned. 'Come, Jack, don't be so glum,' he said, with an

awkward, clumsy attempt at making up to her, and using the old tomboy name he had given her when she was a child, before the family unhappiness had come to the present pitch, and the deadly alienation between father and daughter had begun. 'The meet to-day is at Windy Gap; I'll let you have Yorick to ride if you care to see it.'

She turned upon him like a flash. 'What do you take me for? Do you think I would go to a meet? Do you think I'll ever touch Yorick, or anything else that belongs to you, if I can help it?'

It was not the first time that she had faced and defied the household tyrant; but she had never done it in such plain terms before.

Mrs. Endicott burst into louder weeping and wailing and half-inarticulate panic-stricken pleadings. 'Oh, hush, hush, Joanna, for mercy's sake! You'll send him beside himself, and he'll kill us all!'

The man thus defied stood for an instant speechless, his dark face growing livid under the shock. Then he stepped to one side, made a mocking flourish of a bow, and with another oath and the three words, 'A dutiful, affectionate daughter!' turned on his heel and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER III.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

THE gauntlet had been thrown down, and, if it was not taken up on the moment by the person challenged, the challenger had not the smallest intention of withdrawing it.

The next morning Joanna Endicott did not appear at the breakfast-table. Mrs. Endicott was in the habit of keeping her room in the morning; but when her eldest daughter was sought for, and could nowhere be found, another search was instituted for the mother, and proved equally fruitless. Hugh Endicott had kept a watch on his unhappy wife, as humiliating as it was vigilant, for many a day after her frustrated elopement with the excise officer Morgan. But latterly he had relaxed his vigilance; and in spite of the strife between him and his daughter, he had never for a moment distrusted her, or taken any precaution with regard to her. When her flight along with that of her mother was proved beyond dispute, he remained as if stunned for an interval, in place of setting out in hot pursuit. He did not take more deliberate measures to trace and arrest the pair after he had discovered that the fugitives had got the start of him by more than twelve hours. He appeared utterly callous to the fact that one of the lost women was his daughter, under age and innocent till that night of any act which could in the slightest

degree compromise her character. When he roused himself he swore that he would not lift a finger to recover a couple of abandoned women, the second as guilty as the first. He was confirmed in the relentless purpose contained in his wild words by the receipt of the news that Morgan had left his station about the time when Mrs. Endicott and Joanna had quitted Blackhall. The man had resigned his situation with the declared purpose of going abroad, and it was speedily concluded that the women must have done the same when every inquiry failed to trace them beyond Bristol.

These inquiries were not made either openly or secretly by Hugh Endicott, though they were certainly conducted quietly by his agent and former friend, Mr. Fielding, the head of an old-established, highly respected firm of lawyers in Ashford; and it was just possible that Mr. Fielding might take it for granted that when the first paroxysm of wrath on the part of the aggrieved husband and father was spent, he might authorise and approve of the steps which the lawyer had taken on his own responsibility. For these steps might have been rewarded by the rescue at least of the missing girl from a fate worse than death, the most lamentable that could befall a woman.

But there never was the smallest appearance of such relenting in Hugh Endicott. What he did was sternly to forbid thenceforth the mention of the names of his wife and eldest daughter in his presence, and to cause the removal of every trace of their existence from their former home. He treated them as both alike stained and sunk beyond the hope of reconciliation and right of recognition in the place which had once known them, but was to know them no more.

Joanna Endicott had, indeed, said her good-bye for ever on that October day to the familiar features of Blackhall and the early associations of her life. There was nobody actually entitled to interfere on her behalf. With the exception of Hugh Endicott himself, his family were dead and gone. Her relations on the mother's side had been too much separated from her, and were themselves people with their heads too little above the troubled waters of the struggling middle-class world to bestir themselves and try to reverse the hard sentence which her own conduct had drawn down upon her devoted head. They might not condemn her utterly without a hearing as her father had done, but they could not fail to regard the step she had taken in leaving Blackhall without his knowledge and consent, in the company of her mother, as grossly reckless and undutiful. If they had been joined by Morgan, the partner of the old baffled elopement, who, though he was considered hard-up in his circumstances, had probably furnished the means for the second and double flight, Joanna Endicott's behaviour, if it was not so evil as her father said, was worse than reckless and undutiful; *it was so wrong* and unnatural that it deserved almost any

punishment which it could bring upon her. The relations whom her mother had already disgraced were not likely to be lenient to this fresh offence in which the daughter took part.

The outer world, that had nothing to do with the Endicotts beyond having a knowledge of their existence and of something of their grim and grievous history, was not altogether unjust and unmerciful. There were people even in the neighbourhood of Blackhall who maintained that Hugh Endicott had put the crown on his iniquities when he thus gave up his young daughter without an effort to save her, abandoning her to the care of a woman whose care was worse than none. He threw the first stone at the already tottering fabric of Joanna's fair fame by judging and sentencing her in the same breath with the mother whose reputation had long been ruined, for no reason save that Joanna had been her persecuted mother's champion and was her companion in flight, even if that flight were viewed in the worse light—as one to which Jack Morgan was a party, in which he figured along with the two misguided women.

The Fieldings, father and son, among others, held Joanna blameless of anything except a deep passionate pity for her mother, and a rash ill-omened determination to take that mother's hopeless future into the daughter's inexperienced hands, mould it anew, and share it, however poor and precarious it might be. The Fieldings, who had known the Endicotts all their lives, did not even accuse Joanna of mistaken morbid romance. She had always shown herself rather practical than romantic, and they believed her adventure was more the result of the desperate misdirected energy of a naturally active-minded enterprising nature goaded into action, than the blundering of the habitual dreamer of distorted fantastic dreams.

George Fielding, the lawyer's son, was Joanna's most resolute, indignant defender; which some people thought generous and some foolish in the young man, though he was known in other respects to be no fool.

It was tolerably well understood that George, on his return from college in order to enter into partnership with his father, had been smitten by the handsome girl in her loneliness with her high spirit, and had been repulsed by her in his overtures, as she was known to have repelled every advance made to her friendship since she grew up. This might have been in the mad pride of the Endicotts, which wild Hugh had shared in his day, though the Fieldings were more than a match for the squire of Blackhall in his later fortunes; or it might have been in some secret consciousness that such honest overtures and honest companionship were not really those which were craved by a radically tainted nature—tainted not only by inheritance, but by constant association with her mother.

George Fielding had continued even after his rebuff one of the few persons on friendly terms with the Endicotts, including

Joanna, who had been his playmate when they were boy and girl together. It might be that he was patient in his superior strength and bided his time. It might be that he had a large enough heart and mind to comprehend somewhat that poor Joanna, her whole soul rent by the woeful conflict within herself as well as within her family, was not in circumstances to yield without difficulty to softer influences, to be willing to abandon her mother to her fate, and carry the disgrace which Mrs. Endicott had brought on her children to another hearth, and that an honourable one. Or it might be, as cynical people said, that on second thoughts the young man was more than resigned to the fortunate fact that his imprudent aspirations had been nipped in the bud; that he was thankful for having been denied what he had been so left to himself as to court, and in his thankfulness he was magnanimous, and put in a good word for the culprit to keep her from being utterly slandered and defamed when she went away in so compromising a manner, with no chance of her return. Anyhow, when George Fielding had first been told of the disastrous event by his father in their office at Ashford, one morning when they were alone together, the clerks having been purposely sent out of the way by the head of the firm, the son had instantly asserted his conviction of Joanna's comparative innocence.

Mr. Fielding had said, 'Something far amiss has happened over at Blackhall, George—something that you will not like to hear. No, you need not start to your feet: there is nothing to be done on the spot or on the spur of the moment. That miserable sinner Endicott has not put his wretched wife out of pain, but she has run away again; Joanna has gone with her, and they say the rascal Morgan is in their company.'

'The last is a lie, whoever says it,' said George Fielding, with such invincible incredulity that it lent him coolness with which to meet the rest of the statement. Then he remembered that at Joanna's request he had procured a little money for her private use, and told his father the circumstance, satisfied that the elder man would give it what weight it deserved in the light of evidence of the girl's intention to act independently of Morgan, though in the past Mr. Fielding had simply tolerated and not actively countenanced the prospect of having Joanna Endicott for a daughter-in-law.

George Fielding had never wavered in his entire well-nigh scornful disbelief with regard to that part of the report which was most disparaging to Joanna.

But not all that either of the Fieldings, in company with the more merciful and liberal spirits round Oxcleeve, could say or do in condonation of Joanna Endicott's serious offence against family and social laws, and in defence of her motives, could keep the scandal from taking deep root. It sent forth numerous shoots and tendrils which clung to her name. When a long

period of years passed, and nothing certain or trustworthy was heard either of Joanna Endicott or her mother, or, for that matter, of the black sheep Morgan, in their old neighbourhood, the less conscientious and charitable portion of the community arrived at the conclusion—with what spiteful satisfaction to themselves they only could have told—that Joanna had indeed gone the way of her mother; a way so little to their credit that the best thing which could happen for them, and for the world against which they had sinned, was that their very memories, unpleasant and unprofitable, should be forgotten.

Whether it was retribution or in the more natural sequence of habits and acts, it was a fact that Hugh Endicott's downward progress became not only largely accelerated, but unspeakably darker, drearier, and more hideous from that day. He floundered on among his debts and speculations for a little while, getting continually blinder, madder, less honest, nearer fraud and crime, till no respectable man would be seen in his company. He swaggered, and swore, and struck at those unfortunate satellites who were left with him when they opposed his will, till he was summoned to appear in a law court more than once or twice for disgraceful acts of personal violence. His creditors could not seize and sell his estate, because it went by entail, mortgaged and stripped as it was, to his son Jem; but they sold Hugh Endicott out to the last article he could call his own. In their rage and disgust they put up some of his very clothes to auction, and had them knocked down for a few odd shillings and pence. At this point, when Endicott of Blackhall was wandering about like a vagabond, a raging lunatic, with hardly a change of raiment, or a penny to buy food to keep body and soul together, existing on the extorted alms of old acquaintances who blushed for him while he gave them no thanks, his best word to them being a curse on their niggardliness, his wife's relations did step in. They took upon them, for common decency's sake, with much grumbling and grudging, the maintenance of Jem at school, and the sole charge of the two little girls, Celia and Lucy.

At last Hugh Endicott crept back to Blackhall, to the house which had been his father's and his own, and was still his son's. It was bare of all save a few sticks of old furniture which nobody would be at the trouble to carry off the premises. The house had been falling to pieces for years, until it was impossible to let it without extensive repairs, which could not be undertaken, in the circumstances, till Jem Endicott came of age. But in the meantime it afforded a poor shelter for a social outcast; all the servants were gone except one old woman, who clung to 't' owd ha' and t' owd squire,' half because she had no kindred or friend of her own to cling to, half because of the fidelity to places which women share with cats, and to persons, which they may share with the angels.

In this state, lying on a bed which was borrowed, Hugh Endicott was attacked by a deadly, agonising, and loathsome disease, against which he fought like a wild beast. His solitary attendant was often in mortal terror of going near him lest he should wreak his fury upon her by the help of any instrument that came to his hand.

The clergyman and the doctor of the parish, the duties of whose callings brought them reluctantly to the dying man's side, vowed solemnly many a time, in spite of the obligations of their offices, to quit his presence and never return to it, sooner than remain witnesses to his horrible savagery and blasphemy.

At last torture and the poison in his system did their worst against a frame naturally as enduring in its vigour as that of a moorland bull or an oak. Hugh Endicott gasped out his last breath without one of his blood or a friend to close his eyes. His soul went to meet its Judge; his worn-out body was buried out of sight with the bodies of better men who had gone before him.

There was still an interval till Jem was major, during which Blackhall continued tenantless. But when he succeeded to his poor inheritance—sensible people thought he would have been wise to throw it up—he showed some of his father's doggedness in taking up his quarters in the old house, dismantled and wrecked as it was, with all its unsavoury and unhallowed associations.

But beyond this obstinacy of temper, together with a certain unamiable gruffness not untouched by gloom, Jem happily did not show any other of his father's attributes. He was steady enough after his own fashion; and it was understood not only that he bore the hardships of his lot in stern silence, but that he was painfully pinching and saving from the scanty returns the land brought him, in order if possible to redeem the property. As it was, with all his scraping and paring, all his moiling and toiling, retaining the best fields in his own hands and attempting to take up farming at will in these bad times, he was not likely to do more than touch the fringe of the bonds over the estate.

It was another and a different question whether he might care, when all was done, to reinstate himself on the footing which his father had held in the neighbourhood when he came into possession of Blackhall. It might well be that Jem Endicott's pride would defeat itself. The desire and the ability to return to the ranks of his fellows, dwindling in company, might be alike gone before the opportunity presented itself.

He showed no inclination of the kind at present where he dwelt, with a couple of farm servants to wait upon him and do all he required, while he led the life of a hermit. Certainly, with the object he had in view he could not afford to accept even the few invitations given him by families in the station of life he was born to, settled in the thinly peopled moorland district round

Oxcleeve. If he had possessed money to spend on dress coats and dress boots, his pride would not have suffered him to go among his social equals till he was nearer their level in material prosperity.

Jem Endicott's motives were not particularly exalted, and his method of carrying them out was not very wise; but at least they were respectable. Still more sympathy was felt for him, in spite of his surly rejection of all sympathy, when the farther obstacle to his success—of his having his two younger sisters come to live with him—was put in his uphill path. It was strongly suspected, though Jem did not say so, that they were not at Blackhall by his invitation, but were thrown back on his care by the relatives who had looked after them hitherto.

Jem did not repudiate his sister's claims, however troublesome they might be. For it was impossible that the bachelor establishment which had served for the brother could suffice for the sisters—girls of twenty-one and twenty. He might cut down the estimate of what young ladies required to the lowest figure—and Jem in his impecuniosity was not only known to be prudent; he was believed to be parsimonious—but he must put furniture into one or two of the empty rooms, and secure further service than that of Will Beaver, with Will's wife, Sally, just to look in of a morning and an evening, for the purpose of making a bed and cooking a meal.

When the sacrifice was made it was not probable that there would be great harmony between the members of an incongruous household. Jem was heavy, to begin with, and depressed by playing a losing game. The two girls were considerably his juniors. They had been brought up away from home and apart from him. It was not unlikely that they would be foolish and intractable in disposition, and have nothing in common with their brother save the relationship, which was not of his making.

It was almost a matter of certainty that the neighbours, who had not been particularly warm to Jem, while he had offended them by churlishly declining their cautious advances, would, as a rule, be cooler still to the young women of the family. According to social laws, the sins of Celia and Lucy Endicott's mother and sister would be visited specially on the pair who had suffered most from them.

What had been dimly foreshadowed of the new household at Blackhall was confirmed by experience. The master, without the means or the wish to do more, contented himself with the scantiest changes which common propriety required for the family incumbrances thrown upon his hands. The sisters, or rather the ruling spirit of the two, valued his grudging concessions at rather less than they were worth, and was dissatisfied and embittered.

The few matrons and spinsters who ought to have taken the new-comers under their wing hung back, with hardly an exception, from doing more than barely acknowledging them, and felt

amply justified in their tardiness and rewarded for their discretion when the daughters of Hugh Endicott and his wife, the sisters of Joanna Endicott, betrayed traces of the stock they came of. They were accused of displaying thoughtlessness and levity. Instead of being particularly careful how they behaved, they were heedlessly careless with regard to what they said and did, in reference to the construction sure to be put on their sayings and doings. The girls had not a great field for mischief; but they made the most of the field, and were either stupidly oblivious or incredibly audacious. The circle that sat upon their youthful misdemeanours was a widely different circle from the old rough-riding, free-and-easy society of other days. Remote Devonshire, in its wild moors and inaccessible cleeves and coombes, had become as civilised as other places; such sins and crimes as had been well-nigh rampant in former generations had virtually disappeared. The neighbourhood of Oxcleeve in its men and women might still be a little rustic; but it was decorous in proportion to its condemnation of the scandals of the past.

Public opinion, in branding a couple of ignorant rash girls, did not fail to censure their brother who left them to themselves and showed no concern for what was to become of them. The whole family were in process of being ostracised together—Jem, who could not be said to have emerged from his shell; and his sisters, who shut him in afresh. All that was left of the Endicotts were sinking down into disrepute and indigence—a better term than pecuniary difficulties for their desperate circumstances.

The sentence might be summary and severe, but, considering everything that had gone before it, the result was neither wonderful, nor altogether inexcusable. It is necessary to draw a line somewhere. There did not happen at this time to be a woman of the Endicotts' original rank in the neighbourhood, sufficiently influential, independent, daring, or pitiful, and having the powerful motive of an old alliance with the family, to induce her to cross the line to their rescue. There were not wanting some women kindly, and not unfriendly, to the girls; but there was not one who united all the necessary qualifications to be of service. It was of little consequence that there were men like George Fielding, who had succeeded his father as representative of the old firm of lawyers in Ashford, that still stuck to Jem Endicott's waning fortunes, as far as Jem would let them, and in a moderate way continued to frequent Blackhall. The very idea of a household, in which there were ladies young and unmarried, whose few visitors were mostly men—whatever the standing and character of the men—was enough to lend a suspected tone to it, and to remove it from the list of ordinary unblemished households.

CHAPTER IV.

A TENANT FOR THE COURT AT OXCLEEVE.

The village of Oxcleeve, close to Blackhall on the border of the great moor, was ancient and straggling. Its inhabitants had married and intermarried in their isolation until many of them were toppling on the verge between oddity and madness. The whole population was perilously near extinction by sickliness and decay, breaking out on all hands in what ought to have been the youth and prime of life. The present generation offered a painful contrast to the rude nature in its freshness and power around them, and to the still vigorous grandfathers and grandmothers of a former generation—hale old men and women in their eighties and nineties. The most conspicuous feature of the place was the way in which the roughly built, whitewashed, olive-thatched houses stood at right angles and turned their backs upon each other, even retreating up little lanes in order to secure greater privacy in individual cases. Among the results of such eccentricity was the absence of more than a hundred yards of regular village street at any given spot, with the prevalence of bits of green of all shapes and sizes, tenanted by ponies, donkeys, and the geese, in which Oxcleeve, in the absence of any other small staple production, might be said to do a roaring trade. Balancing the greens were shaggy gardens, open draw-wells, and the sudden intrusion anywhere and everywhere of stables and cowhouses of cottage dimensions and on cottage principles, with their attendant manure heaps.

There was not a single shop. Tea, groceries, and tobacco, with ale and spirits, had to be got from the next village, distant half a mile. Butchers' meat, except what some farmer occasionally killed in an amateur way, and, after he had served himself and his family, dispensed at the current price to his neighbours, was brought from the town of Ashford, six miles off. The only food that one could absolutely depend upon getting at Oxcleeve consisted of bread, dairy produce, and an unlimited supply of ducks and geese. For some reason fowls did not take kindly to the soil. Of course there was game in the season, which brought relays of sportsmen to the country houses round to keep it down. There was also a rough-and-ready little inn—half inn, half primitive farmhouse—called the 'Furze-bush,' in which country people held their feasts, that was at least capable of supplementing the other resources at a pinch. There was no danger of starving at Oxcleeve, though there might be an obligation on those who had not much connection with the outer world to live on plain fare served up with monotonous reiteration—the joint which one of the farmers, who acted as general

carriers, brought from Ashford on the weekly market day, hot and cold, a pair of ducks swimming in their sea of gravy, the mutilated carcasses of the same, rabbit pie, a dish of trout, and perpetual junket.

But much homelier fare was the prevailing diet at Oxcleeve. There were not more than three or four houses in the village itself which ranked above the tumble-down cottages, except the house of God—a little old grey church that looked coeval with the moor. But the church was not in the middle of the worshippers who said their prayers in it every Sunday. It stood on a knoll on the outskirts of the village; had been judiciously restored, and was kept in perfect order by the instrumentality of the severely earnest young vicar, the Rev. Miles North. His vicarage was out of the village also. It was not better than a superior farmhouse, standing in the middle of its offices and grounds among the trees in the hollow of the 'Cleeve,' which, though nominally associated with Oxcleeve, was in reality a little bit off, and was looked down upon literally both by the village and Blackhall. Neither were the new school and schoolhouse quite near. The funds for their erection were raised by the vicar, and he had them built under the shadow of the church.

Not even a resident country surgeon or postmaster demanded better accommodation than that needed by the peasant dwellers in the cottages, of which the occupants were for the most part the proprietors likewise. The last doctor had been succeeded by a man who preferred the next village as a place of residence, and the natives received so few letters that they never dreamt of having a post office all to themselves. The Oxcleeve letters arrived in the regular way as far as Ashford, and were thence dribbled out to their owners by chance hands. Whoever was not content with this simple if precarious system might send a private messenger to Ashford, and, if he also happened to be liberal-minded and public-spirited, might call at once for the letters belonging to the whole village, and distribute them at his discretion and leisure. Probably the arrangement which argued the minimum of interest in what took place beyond the narrow bounds of Oxcleeve, and the maximum of easy-going confidence in the obliging temper and general integrity of one's fellows, was unique in this nineteenth century England, where any village cobbler or old dame selling dried fish and gingerbread will act as postmaster or postmistress in default of a better.

The exceptional houses included three of mark. There was the two-storied inn bearing the sign of the 'Furze-bush,' in egg-yellow and apple-green. There was a well-built stone house, within a shrubbery protected by iron railings and a gate, situated in the central point of the village, where there was a green, still owning a pound for stray animals, and showing the stump of a goodly ash tree, beneath which had stood within the memory

of man the village stocks. This perfectly modern and habitable house had been built and lived in by the late doctor, and was still tenanted by his widow. Nearly opposite the house, with the green between them, was a very old house, wide and squat, with bulging-out walls, an equally bulging thatch roof, and heterogeneous offices. It was said to be the oldest house in the village—in fact, the nucleus round which the other houses had sprung up. It was fondly believed, by those who had time and learning for any belief on the subject, to have existed before the time of the Armada. If so, the predecessors of Drake and Hawkins must have been satisfied with modest and homely accommodation. The house was known as the 'Court.' It was surrounded by a low wall, and entered from the green by a wicket gate, which was flanked and overshadowed by a couple of fine ash trees still flourishing. From the gate a flagged pathway ran in a tolerably steep descent down a sloping garden of not many yards square to the house at the foot, and terminated in a low wide porch furnished with a couple of stone seats.

The Court had belonged for generations to the Endicotts of Blackhall, and, like everything else belonging to them, had fallen down in the world. It had been last occupied by a venerable couple, a yeoman farmer and his wife, scarcely removed in manners and habits from the villagers round them, though he had been distinguished from several other men of the same name in the place as 'Gentleman Granaway.' The old couple were sleeping in the churchyard round the church, and the Court, which was certainly not everybody's bargain, had been standing empty for years. It had not even attracted fresh tenants in the change of fashion which had lately, by the potentiality of the moor, brought a sprinkling of summer visitors to remote and inaccessible Oxcleeve, approached by no railway that came nearer than Ashford. These strangers stowed themselves away in extraordinary holes and corners—in the low-roofed, small-windowed spare rooms of the better-built cottages; in the 'Furze-bush,' where the intruders had to make way for the more legitimate feasters or 'pleasurers' whenever these elected to appear on the scene; in the vicarage, imposing themselves on the vicar, like his ne'er-do-well of a cousin, who was a parasite in that otherwise well-ordered dwelling; in disused sections of farmhouses. There had even been word of fitting up barns and camping out on the moor where sportsmen and artists were concerned. But nobody had proposed to establish himself either at Blackhall or the Court. At Blackhall, though the Endicott girls might have been glad of any variety, and Jem might have been fain to turn an honest penny by lodging-letting had it not been for shame's sake, strangers were kept at bay by the Squire's surliness and hermit habits, even in the shooting season. At the Court positive squalor as well as forlornness stood in the way. Everything was in crying need of a thorough

scraping, painting, whitewashing. For the personal walk and conversation of even Gentleman Granaway—not to say of his slatternly old dame—had not been conducive to household sweetness and cleanliness, or to any even tolerably gently nurtured person, taking the place of these predecessors without great transformations.

It was, therefore, with some surprise that George Fielding—who continued ostensibly the agent for the Squire of Blackhall, though there was little left to be agent for, and the office had long been purely honorary—found among the letters which he was opening in his office in Ashford one morning in the late spring an apparently *bonâ fide* offer for the Court at Oxcleeve, an offer to take it as it stood for a term of years. 'It must be from somebody who knows nothing of the real place,' he reflected, 'though how he came to hear of it in that case it is hard to say: the writer is some scheming fellow who has just taken a look at the outside of the poor old house, and, imagining that it is not half so bad as it is, supposes it can be patched up and let for summer lodgings. What are we all coming to? But it would take hundreds to make it even decently habitable. Very likely when it came to the point Endicott would be applied to, and Jem has no hundreds, ay, or twenties, or tens to spare. I don't think he would let himself be lugged into a doubtful speculation—still, who knows? Impecunious men, like drowning men, catch at straws. If he take my advice he will have nothing to do with this would-be tenant.'

George Fielding was not impecunious. He and his father before him had thriven so well on a fine old country business, conducted on strictly honourable principles, that they had become long ago wealthier than many of the squires for whom they acted. The Fieldings might have become squires in their turn, especially as they were well-born—very likely they would have done so if they had been Scotchmen with a craze for territorial possessions. But George, like his father, had a tender heart to the handsome, unassuming Jacobean red-brick house, with the offices on the ground-floor, and the big bowery garden behind, the whole set down in the market town of Ashford. Both men had been born in that house, in which the younger still dwelt, the sole representative of the family.

Oddly as it may sound to some, George Fielding had also a tender heart to the profession which he had practised for nearly a quarter of a century, ever since he came from college. He might have given up his business, or more profitably sold it, and retired with a fair fortune on his father's death; but he still stuck to the old lines—not for mere money-grubbing, not even altogether because he had known that his father, for whose memory he had much regard, would have been grieved and disappointed if he could have foreseen his son's retirement from business in the prime of life, with the extinction, or the transfer to new

hands under the old name, of the firm of 'Fielding & Son' in which he had taken so much pride. George had still other reasons. To him the profession of the law in which he had been bred was his field of work in the world, and to withdraw from it without any strong bent in another direction for the mere purpose of being idle, a man about the world with the means of indulging every whim and freak, did not recommend itself to him as a particularly manly course. There was another thing—he was a student of human nature, as another man is a student of the stars above his head or the stones beneath his feet, and he was persuaded, rightly or wrongly, that in his profession there were wide opportunities for such a study, and that by no means always on the seamy side. He warmly repudiated the opinion that lawyers know nothing save evil of their kind, and, in consequence of their knowledge, learn to distrust their fellows, from the least to the greatest, as instinctively as they breathe the air around them.

George Fielding was still in his prime, and did not look an hour older than his forty years. He was slightly undersized, but able-bodied and active, fit for the endless tramps over the moor with or without his gun or his fishing-rod, which were his chief recreations. His face, dark as a gipsy's, was shrewd and kindly rather than handsome. He had spent the greater part of his life in Ashford, and it and the surrounding country were very much the world to him, while he was intimately acquainted with most of the men and women as well as with the fauna and flora of the district. But whoever chose to set him down as a man of small culture and provincial narrowness, because he had stayed largely at home and had the material for endless gossip at his fingers' ends, would have fallen into a great error. He had made up by the minuteness of his investigations, and by the orderly principle on which he had conducted them, for the smallness of the area in which they were made. As well call White of Selborne narrow in his parochial researches. George Fielding was not a great naturalist any more than a great scholar, but he was considerably beyond the average in originality and intelligence. His natural qualities, together with his measure of scholarship, had not been rubbed out and frittered away by incessant contact with his fellows. A stationary life in the depth of the country may have a mellowing and ripening as well as a rusting influence. It depends upon the subject acted upon. Certainly such a life is sometimes another version of learned leisure, with a strong infusion of individuality and simple humanity in the learning, which is not altogether that of school and college.

George Fielding had not married—not because he had never forgotten his first love, to whom he had been loyal, lost Joanna Endicott; rather because he had never met in his comparatively limited circle of female acquaintances another girl or woman who had taken his mature fancy or come up to his later ideal. He was in such a benighted condition in this respect, in spite of the

persistent attempts of some of his fair friends to open his eyes, that he had grown quite reconciled to his state of bachelorhood, and contemplated the prospect of growing old among his office papers and strong-boxes, his books and handsome out-of-date furniture, his old-fashioned trees and flowers, his old clerks, old servants, and old friends in all ranks, with positively cheerful philosophy. He was satisfied that if he had married, it ought to have been done long ago. If he were tempted to the solemn act at this date, after he had refrained all these years, it would occasion a *bouleversement*, a shaking up and overturning of the whole past and present economy of his life, which he could not contemplate from a respectful distance without dislike and dismay.

'When I look at the writing again I am not sure that it is not a woman's hand,' thought George Fielding, taking up for a second time the letter concerning the Court, and scanning it closely. 'I am not prepared to swear either way, or to say that I have never seen it before. "J. Jones" is no clue. "J" may stand for John or for Jane, for Jeremiah or for Julia, and I have known one or two Joneses as well as Browns and Robinsons in the course of my life. Now, who the dickens is that, before I have well had my breakfast, and this not market day?'

The last hasty question was in recognition of a peal from the office bell, an assured peal, announcing the arrival of a client. The next moment the client was shown in, and Mr. Fielding had to vacate his comfortable chair and hand it to the new-comer. His usual clients were men, and homely men to boot, for whom the ordinary chairs were perfectly suitable. But this client was a lady; more than that, she was a lady of his acquaintance with regard to whom he was aware that she set special store on small social forms and ceremonies. He had so lively a perception of this that he felt himself called upon, after the necessary greeting, not only to vacate his chair, but to subside on an office stool. He made the sacrifice, but it was of such a character that he was conscious of a disposition to swing to and fro and fidget in an undignified manner.

The lady was Mrs. Reynolds, the widow of the late Dr. Reynolds, of Oxcleeve, who still occupied his house in the village. She was a large woman, imposing in size alone. George Fielding was not only acquainted with her, he knew all about her. She had possessed pretensions both as a beauty and as the daughter of a small Church dignitary. Neither of these was she inclined to relinquish, though she had reached the shady side of sixty, and in one of the earlier chapters in her history she had condescended to marry a village doctor. The last step had only been compulsory in the sense that she was getting *passée* when she took it, and with all her vanity she had the foresight to fear that she might not have the acceptance or rejection of many more offers in her power. The consequences of this step,

including expatriation to Oxcleeve, had been so trying that, after a short shivering experience of the last village on the edge of the moor—a bracing experience which she had not relished much more than poor Mrs. Hugh Endicott had liked it—Mrs. Reynolds did her best to induce her husband to sell his practice to whomsoever would buy it, and remove to a more civilised locality. Finding that her influence just stopped short of this movement, she had possessed sufficient sense to enable her, after making sundry wry faces, to submit to the inevitable, and even to get the best out of it that she could. She had been still further reconciled to the situation when a sister, who had taken pity on Mrs. Reynolds's loneliness and paid her a long visit, had been, as it were, smitten by the same fatal necessity of marrying and settling in the undesirable neighbourhood. The gain had not been without its drawback, especially to begin with, for this sister had married much better in a worldly point of view than Mrs. Reynolds had married. She had become the wife of Gregory Barnes of Barnes Clyffe, a squire unexceptionable in all respects, except that he was, like many Devonshire squires of his day, not too polished in his manners or brilliant in his parts, and that he absolutely declined to attend church. But this divergence from the orthodox rule did not, considering the type of Devonshire parson Mr. Barnes had been accustomed to, necessarily argue hostility to primitive Christianity on his part.

In course of years the advantages of the connection with Barnes Clyffe greatly outweighed any mortification which had been inflicted on Mrs. Reynolds by her younger sister's becoming the wife of one of the leading squires in the district, while she herself was no more than the doctor's spouse, latterly his widow. In fact, the connection with Barnes Clyffe was one of the main inducements which caused the lady not only to let her husband alone in his old quarters, but so far to change her estimate of Oxcleeve as a residence that she stayed on there in her widowhood. She positively adopted the little moorland village, and elected to preside over it in the character of its lady patroness, at least till the vicar married.

Mrs. Reynolds still simpered from between her grey ringlets at past sixty, as she had simpered from between her flaxen curls when she was sixteen. She continued to assert her rank, and even to take precedence of other ladies in spite of their indignant protests as she had been wont to do in a cathedral close, though even there her father had only been one of the lesser luminaries. She paid no attention to the decree by which a wife, except in accordance with the artificial provisions of a herald's office, leaves behind her the paternal home and all it implies, and takes the style and condition of her husband.

When it has been hinted that Mrs. Reynolds had not a large mind in proportion to her extensive bodily dimensions, it is not intended to insinuate that she was a fool; at least she was

a fool only on one side—the simpering side, in connection with which she had a girlish giggle, an inclination to bridle in a ridiculously juvenile way, a habit of saying silly things in reference to her unprotected condition as a widow and her surviving attractions as a fine woman, with their danger to over-susceptible man, and the scandal which might arise in consequence.

On her other side Mrs. Reynolds was a wide-awake woman, with a sharp eye to her own interest. She was a clever and careful manager of a not very extensive income. Though she kept up an establishment of two maids and a boy in buttons, which looked well in the eyes of a simple-minded Devonshire world, and was fairly comfortable in its working; though she dressed handsomely, nay, sumptuously, in the judgment of the initiated, according to her station and years, she never exceeded her means or incurred debts to the amount of a farthing.

For the last achievement George Fielding was inclined to respect her, but the feeling did not go the length of his being disposed to welcome a visit from her at any place or time, least of all in his office during business hours. The vicinity of the great moor was not without its share of the influence of other wilds in rendering the men and women who hovered on its brink more gregarious; still, Ashford was not exactly the moor, and the forenoon was not the season for such hospitality.

CHAPTER V.

PROS AND CONS.

Mrs. Reynolds was ready to speak for herself, as, to do her justice, she always was. 'I hope you will excuse this intrusion, Mr. Fielding,' she said, with one of her idiotic giggles; 'if I had not thought myself justified in coming to you, then you may be sure I should not have been guilty of a step which is, perhaps—well, a little out of the way from a woman in my position to a man in yours.' She spoke the words mincingly, and glanced round deprecatingly, as if she bespoke the forbearance of the lawyer and his clerks in the outer office.

'Not at all, Mrs. Reynolds,' said George, drumming lightly on the desk at his elbow as a vent for his impatience: 'I have often visits from ladies.'

'Yes, no doubt,' said the lady a little reluctantly, evidently not approving of the general classification. 'You are a highly favoured man,' with another simper. 'But I dare say these ladies come with or for their husbands. It is different when one has the misfortune to be a widow, and when a gentleman is a bachelor like yourself.' (Here there was a peculiarly exasperating giggle.) 'We are friends, Mr. Fielding, so we may speak

the truth on this delicate point, as on others of less difficulty, without any fear of being misunderstood.'

'Certainly,' answered George promptly, while he asked himself blankly, 'How old does she take me for?' He took care not to look at her—for he knew she was capable of accusing him of ogling her, though he was young enough to have been her son—while he made the jesting amendment, 'But you must not think that I have no widows among my clients. In point of fact, widows decidedly preponderate where my lady clients are concerned.'

'Ah! but I am not a client,' said Mrs. Reynolds briskly. 'Besides, there are widows and widows.'

He bowed as he thought, 'Is that what she has come over to Ashford to tell me? I wonder at what age she thinks a woman ought to be left a widow? Poor old Reynolds was seventy, though I suppose his age does not matter, and she is sixty if she is a day. What a curiously babyish look there is about her round eyes and the corners of her mouth! She combines it with an air of portly matronliness and sage experience which would in itself be overwhelming. I do not wish to be rude, but I do wish she would go about her business; I have her word that she is not here as a client, and she ought not to be in want of a friend's advice and help with a good sort like Greg Barnes for her brother-in-law. I take it she has worn out Barnes's patience, and, since she is a respectable kind of woman according to her light, and alone in the world as she says, I'm in for it, there is nothing else to be said. But she must let alone that rubbish about widows and single men and the world's opinion. The poor old slandered world! Hamlet called it mad in his time, but it was never so stark staring mad as this would come to.'

George Fielding had to hear a little more about widows and single men before the interview was ended.

Mrs. Reynolds had been occupied in taking a survey of the room, which was simply a well-used office with marks of considerable standing and substantiality about it, and in marshalling her ideas while the gentleman was pursuing his reflections. Like most large people she was deliberate in her actions, both bodily and mental; she now returned to the charge. 'The truth is, Mr. Fielding, that it is on account of what I feel to be due to a friend, another widow lady, that I am here to-day. I prefer to make a little sacrifice, and even run some risk on my own account, in a place where I am known and, I flatter myself, can be trusted with regard to what is right and proper, rather than suffer her to expose herself to any misconception.'

'The deuce you do!' muttered George; but in speaking aloud he remarked, a trifle drily perhaps, that she was very good. He was sure everybody was obliged to her. Would she explain herself?

'Presently, Mr. Fielding. You gentlemen are always in such a hurry unless you have some end of your own to serve, then you can be teasingly slow. I remember, when my poor dear husband met me first at Dawlish, and attended me for my headaches, before I had any acquaintance with him save as a medical man, what a long time those headaches were of being cured. He! he! he! Mr. Fielding.'

'She cannot accuse me of detaining her against her will,' her reluctant companion thought, 'but I believe she is a lunatic on one subject.' The next instant he blushed, in spite of his forty years, and sought to make amends by not defining the subject, and by declining to class the lady's lunacy in his own mind as dangerous, or as anything save grossly ridiculous and pitiable—an aberration of intellect which a man was bound to shield and not to expose.

'I have come in the room of the lady who is making an offer for the Court,' said the unconscious Mrs. Reynolds, all at once leaping to the point.

'Hollo!' cried George Fielding, nearly losing his balance, and apologising the next moment for the liberty, since Mrs. Reynolds was drawing herself up and looking as if she were about to feel very much offended.

'I beg your pardon, but I am in receipt of a letter this very morning from the lady you mention. So it was a woman's handwriting, after all?'

'Yes. Did you not see that at once? I do think it is such a pity when ladies have not a distinctly feminine hand. My poor dear husband used to say he could never have employed me—not that he ever dreamt of such a thing!—to write out a prescription for him. Nobody would have mistaken my hand for an assistant's, or supposed that it belonged to anybody save a gentlewoman. I know it is the fashion now for men and women to write very much alike, but I cannot say that I admire the practice. I have a particular objection to large, strong characters coming from a lady's pen. I often tell my sister at Barnes Clyffe that she ought to guard against either of the girls acquiring a bold style of calligraphy; the next thing that would happen would be for her to behave boldly! Governesses are not more trustworthy as to writing nowadays than with regard to other branches of education.'

'This is not particularly like a man's hand,' said George Fielding, taking up the letter lying on the desk, and looking at it again. 'It might pass for either a man's or a woman's. I have frequently seen writing like it. By-the-bye, let me remind you, Mrs. Reynolds, that many men write neat, small hands; I flatter myself mine might rank under that category. This is not neat, neither is it especially small. It is stiff; the writer has not had great practice, or learnt to let herself go. It does not look like the performance of anybody who has been in the

habit of writing much, who is a scribbler of notes, any more than accustomed to act as an office clerk. Who is the lady? Where did she hear of the Court or see it? But the chances are that she has not seen the poor old hole. Jones? Jones? There was Will Jones of Plymouth, whom I knew an age ago. He used to come up for the shooting; but I do not know that I ever heard of a Mrs. Jones in relation to Will; or, for that matter, of any Mrs. Jones likely to figure as a householder in so benighted a region.'

'Oh, Mr. Fielding!' cried Mrs. Reynolds. But she was not going to reproach him for slandering the neighbourhood in which she dwelt, though after all he had got more to do with it than she had. She was swelling with self-importance in her ardent desire to be the first to communicate a most valuable piece of information. 'Not *Mrs.* Jones, please; Lady Jones!'

George Fielding was so perverse as not to give any sign of being deeply impressed beyond raising his eyebrows. 'And who may this Lady Jones be,' he asked deliberately, 'who has come down upon us like a whirlwind, or a wolf on the fold, and is so preposterous as to propose to lodge her title and dignities at the Court, where Gentleman Granaway rested his stick and hung up his straw hat very much like the other gaffers around him?'

'But she is nothing very grand,' protested Mrs. Reynolds, taken in her own toils and looking a little put out, which was a rare thing with her. 'She comes from Australia, where her late husband was long settled, and held a governorship for some years. She has not been accustomed to living in any very great style. She told me so herself, the first evening I met her when I was up in town last. You know, Mr. Fielding,' went on Mrs. Reynolds, who was quite herself again, 'I always run up to town in the course of the spring—I make a point of it. It is an annual custom, desirable in every respect. Among other benefits to be gained from it, I may just mention that we poor country people are prevented from rusting altogether. Lady Jones and I were at the same boarding-house in the West End; an exceedingly select, refined establishment, I assure you—I can give you a card if you care to have it—for gentlemen as well as ladies are received, provided they can furnish unexceptionable references and are introduced by persons beyond suspicion. It would not do, of course, to admit gentlemen promiscuously among us poor unprotected females,' ended Mrs. Reynolds, giving a slight toss of her large head in addition to a conscious giggle.

'Of course not,' he answered with perfect gravity, 'a most ill-considered, injudicious proceeding, I should say. Thanks for proposing to be my sponsor; but, you see, I do not, like you, pay an annual visit to London—I am content to rust. But let us stick to the point. I do not see my way so clearly as I ought, I dare say. I can perfectly well understand how a Lady Jones arrived from Australia some time ago, or lately—I don't know

that it matters much when, and I don't think you stated the time—may have found her way to a West End boarding-house, where you came in contact with her and granted her the privilege of your friendship. But I confess I cannot divine what brings her to an out-of-the-way Devonshire village like Oxcleeve, or what makes her think of such an utterly unlikely house as the Court, so as to risk taking it for a term of years.'

'I can explain it all easily,' said Mrs. Reynolds complacently; and, in preparation for the explanation, she drew off her gloves and loosely folded her large white hands, as if she were holding them in readiness for oratorical declamation. 'You gentlemen will so rush to the heart of a thing, no beating about the bush with you. Lady Jones is not very communicative—on the contrary, rather reserved; but she took to me, I need not say. When I spoke of where I lived, of Oxcleeve and the moor, she brightened up amazingly, and said she believed the moorland air would suit her too. She asked if there were any houses to let near me, and I could not recall one within a reasonable distance except the Court, which to be sure is all but next door. But, like you, I thought at first it was out of the question. However, she did not think so. It seems she had been at Oxcleeve—she did not say precisely when, and I could not quite gather from her conversation without palpably cross-questioning her, as you, sir, are cross-questioning me. I need not tell you, Mr. Fielding, that between ladies that would hardly be admissible; I have no doubt we shall hear all about it soon, when she is more at home with everybody and has more to say for herself. I dare say it was with some of the summer visitors she was at Oxcleeve, or she may have driven over from Ashford here, or from Hyndcross, though I do not think it was recently. The thing is that she recollected the Court, and thought it might be put in order so as to suit her. I confess I was rather inclined to catch at the chance of having such a neighbour for myself. Only think, Mr. Fielding! the Court made habitable and presentable, and occupied by a Lady Jones—not in summer alone, but in the depth of winter, for she talked of settling in the country and staying there all the year round! How nice! How charming!' She clutched the idea, giggling like a girl.

'For you, yes. And for her also so far as your company is concerned,' he hastened to add. 'But did you take into consideration that the house is in a lamentable state of dirt and neglect? It is not fit for a woman of respectable antecedents—above all for a Lady Jones. She may have hailed from an Australian shanty, but, depend upon it, she has forgotten that long ago, and is full of colonial ideas of barbaric luxury and splendour. Did you explain to her that Jem Endicott, the landlord, is not in a position to lay out a single farthing upon the place?'

'That does not signify,' said Mrs. Reynolds cheerfully,

fingering her rings; 'she said she should not mind laying out what was required herself, although it came to two or three hundred pounds. I assure you I did not wish to deceive her, and certainly I did not wish to have anybody whom I could visit living at the Court in its present disgraceful condition, even if Lady Jones would consent to do it.'

'Lay out two or three hundred pounds on another man's property, an old tumble-down house in a remote village, where there would be no chance of disposing of the lease!' said George Fielding derisively. 'The woman is mad! Did you tell her there was neither shop nor market, not a soul she could speak to within a circuit of miles?'

'I did not think it necessary to tell her that,' said Mrs. Reynolds, with some dignity and a shade of asperity. 'For one thing, I consider we have quite a nice little circle among ourselves, without so much as having to be obliged to you polite people of Ashford. There is my humble dwelling,' checking off the different houses on her large fingers with their well-trimmed nails. 'There is the vicarage, where, to be sure, dear Mr. North is a bachelor; but we are bound to take pity on him, are we not, like the good creatures my poor dear husband always said we were? And Mr. Tony is very amusing, though he is not all he should be, I am sorry to say, and we could not have him on our visiting list if he lived in any other house than the vicarage. There is my sister at Barnes Clyffe. There are the Lacys at Thorn. They are rolling in wealth and perfectly admissible, though I understand he is a sleeping partner in a mercantile firm which deals in nothing bigger than buttons, if you will believe me. But, when one considers the number of buttons which are in use, one can understand it—his wealth and polish, I mean—and the buttons don't bear his name, which must be a great comfort to the Lacys.'

George Fielding stopped her before she descended into lower walks than that of the gilded button-maker. 'The present company is always excepted, and of course you are a host in yourself, Mrs. Reynolds.'

She bowed and grinned graciously, while he said to himself apologetically, 'Hang it! one is forced to pay her what she takes for compliments; it is all in the day's work.'

He went on aloud, 'But you will not refuse to own that Oxcleeve—so far as it has to do with the outer world—is, well, exclusive in winter, and the moor is tremendous in a snow-storm?'

'Not more tremendous than the Australian bush, I fancy. I am surprised to hear how you speak,' said Mrs. Reynolds innocently. 'I always understood you admired the moor, which everybody raves about in summer. Besides, you do not give us simple people, who live out of the world as you think, credit for higher motives which we do not care to brandish in your face.

I will only say it is not dear Mr. North alone who thinks of the marvellous ignorance, the lamentable superstition, the appalling —I cannot call it by any other name—the appalling sauciness and surliness of many of our benighted villagers. Somebody besides their clergyman, who is only a man after all, must stay among them, and try to enlighten and soften them. We cannot, no, we cannot, if we are Christians, leave them to themselves I told myself that when I lost Dr. Reynolds, and the natural impulse of any lady in my desolate circumstances would have been to repair to Torquay, or Exeter, or Bath.'

'I do justice to your self-sacrifice,' said George, a little drily; 'but if Lady Jones is acting on your principle, to be consistent she ought to have stayed where she was, or gone back to the bush, and experimented on the squatters and bushrangers. Is she old or young?'

'Now, that is not a fair question,' declared Mrs. Reynolds, shaking one of her large forefingers at him. 'For shame, Mr. Fielding! for shame!'

'I beg your pardon, or rather hers,' he cried, in a voice of despair; 'I believe I asked the question professionally, and not in a spirit of impertinent curiosity.'

'In that case I forgive you. I should say Lady Jones is young—not a girl, you know, but not old; oh dear! not old.'

'Half a century if she is a day, I take it.' George leaped to the conclusion silently.

'She does not do herself justice with those ridiculous widows' caps she wears,' his informant explained confidentially. 'She led me to understand Sir Benjamin has been dead these two years. I am certain my poor dear husband would not have wished me to disparage his taste by continuing to make myself a fright for more than one year at the longest. She has not walked well since she had a bad attack of fever, she told me. It is a loss to her in every respect,' remarked Mrs. Reynolds complacently, for she was a singularly good pedestrian for her threescore years. 'She does not attend to those little secrets of the toilet and finishing touches which the most sober-minded and unsophisticated of us women may allow ourselves,' ended the lady, with a coquettish flutter of her ribands and laces.

'I am afraid to ask any more questions,' he said submissively, now that she was referring to mysteries which he could not penetrate; 'but suppose I put the whole thing before you plainly and concisely. This uncommunicative widow bringing a title from Australia, having apparently no relations or friends to refer to, certainly without knowing anybody here save you, with whom she made acquaintance casually, proposes to take the Court at Oxcleeve, going in for all the repairs, though the cost should amount to several hundred pounds—what do you think of it? I put the thing to a woman of your experience, and beg you to tell me if it has not a doubtful look; whether you are, on the

face of it, perfectly comfortable in your own mind in lending your support to such a would-be tenant for Endicott?'

'Perfectly comfortable,' answered the lady, with a quickness in seeing his meaning which none who did not know the two sides of Mrs. Reynolds's character would have expected from her. 'I am not such a ninny as you seem to think. I warned her that references would be asked in all probability. I did not require them for myself, but I used the word "business" to suggest that it would be advisable they should be forthcoming. None could be readier than she was; indeed, I believe, if I had not been so prompt, she would have anticipated me with the name of her banker—Drummond—he is my banker also, by a remarkable coincidence, you will admit. I wished to see one of the confidential clerks, anyhow; so I thought I could not do better than call when I was up in town. You need be under no apprehension, sir; Lady Jones's name is well known and highly esteemed among the bank's customers.'

'Upon my word, Mrs. Reynolds, you are not a bad business woman,' said George, with sincere admiration; 'you strike when the iron is hot. You come furnished with the necessary credentials. If you had not called on me this morning I might have lost poor Jem Endicott a desirable tenant, and another is not likely to turn up for the Court in a hurry. I had more than half a mind not to trouble myself by having anything to do with so suspicious a character as an offerer for the Court on the very worst of repairing leases.'

'Surely you would not have rejected the offer without giving it some consideration?' protested Mrs. Reynolds reproachfully, alarmed, both as a business woman and a lady of uncertain age but certain attractions, at the risk she had run of the sudden demolition of her castle in the air. 'I am not thinking chiefly of the interests of that disagreeable young Endicott, to whom the smallest rent you could ask for the Court—and you cannot have the face to ask much, when she is to do everything in the way of repair—would be a glorious windfall. I am considering the loss of the boon of Lady Jones's presence amongst us for me, for Oxcleeve, should she prove a congenial spirit.'

'As I did not know that the offerer was a Lady Jones, or that she had the pleasure of your acquaintance, you will exonerate me from any indifference to your interests,' said Fielding; wondering within himself if he were becoming grandiloquent in bandying fine speeches with anybody so hollow and resonant as Mrs. Reynolds. She had put on her gloves with a mixture of coyness and coaxing peculiar to her, which might have been pretty to some people who did not object to graces on a large scale forty years before, and was rising to take her leave at last, he was thankful to say.

Then she fired a parting shot. 'After the favour I have done you in coming and sitting with you and explaining all this,' she

told him, 'you cannot do less than accompany me back. You and I are well known to be good friends and no more, so that we need not fear to take a little turn together in case people should talk foolishly. It is always better to give no occasion for gossip, but really I do not apprehend it here; neither would I go out of the way of it in a good cause, as I think I have shown to-day. I am going straight to the "Three Foxes," where Lady Jones is waiting for me.'

'"The combat thickens; On, ye brave!"' said George Fielding under his breath, as he took down his hat after bowing his acquiescence. 'Shall I tell her we will let people speak, for I give her liberty to say she has refused me, after I have persecuted her with a desperate passion from the date of old Reynolds's death? I hope Lady Jones will not force a man to pay compliments and be a stickler for propriety in her sere and yellow leaf.'

CHAPTER VI.

GEORGE FIELDING HAS AN INTERVIEW WITH LADY JONES.

GEORGE FIELDING, with the massive shoulders of Mrs. Reynolds looming before him, entered the best parlour of the 'Three Foxes.' It was only the best parlour, for the 'Three Foxes,' though it had lodged and entertained many a jolly sportsman, as it was bound to do by its name, was but the country inn of a country town. A lady was standing by the solitary window looking out, not into the quiet street, but at a side view over an intervening range of high-lying pasture-land running on to a shoulder of the great moor. Though she was standing very still and gazing fixedly at what was attracting her attention, she turned instantly and advanced towards the new-comers.

Whether George Fielding were grandiloquent or not in his compliments, there could be no question that Mrs. Reynolds was bombastic in the introduction which she gave in a full-mouthed style: 'Lady Jones, allow me to present you to my friend Mr. Fielding. I am sure that in any business transaction you may have with him he will grant you the full benefit of our friendship.'

George muttered something inaudible, while Lady Jones looked him full in the face. He had already noticed that, though she had no limp, she walked with a little uncertainty, such as belongs either to physical weakness or to advanced age. But her tall figure was good though spare, and she was not old --not above forty, so far as he could judge. She was a striking-looking woman in her black woollen gown with its long straight folds, her face framed by one of the widows' caps, with the stiff white borders and broad wing-like strings falling on her shoulders.

to which Mrs. Reynolds had so strongly objected. Lady Jones's complexion was colourless, and had the bleached white which one associates with a hot climate, so that her visitors concluded rightly that the late Sir Benjamin's run must have been in one of the hottest divisions of the great island which is large enough to stretch so far on both sides of the tropics. The climate seemed also to have bleached the band of hair seen under her cap. It was much nearer silver than iron-grey. The pale face surmounted by the silvered hair and the white cap, together with the slightly wavering gait of the figure, would have given something of a ghostly, shadowy character to the lady's aspect, but these other attributes were contradicted by an expression of quiet power and determination in every feature of the face, especially in the eyes, whose direct appeal somehow thrilled the man they looked at, though he could not remember having seen anybody like Lady Jones before. She was not the style of woman whom he could imagine swearing an eternal friendship with Mrs. Reynolds, yet she seemed not displeased by the terms of the introduction, for she not only bowed to him, after a moment's hesitation she shook hands as if to ratify it. Then she sat down with an invitation to the others to be seated, and said, with a sigh of relief as if at a difficulty surmounted, and speaking more cheerfully than he had expected she would at the first glance, 'Then that is arranged so far. I may take it for granted there will not be any obstacle to my renting the Court?'

'I do not see one,' said George, 'unless you should yourself draw back when you know better what you are doing. But you must understand I am only acting for Mr. Endicott of Blackhall, who knows nothing yet, so far as I am aware, of your offer for his house. The decision must rest with him.'

'Of course,' she said, with a slight tightening of the lips, to which a certain compression seemed natural, or else a habit which had become like a second nature to her. 'But so far as the matter rests with me you will find there will be no drawing back.' She spoke with more formality than she had shown before, and betrayed traces of the self-restraint and reserve to which Mrs. Reynolds had alluded.

George Fielding recognised still greater evidence of this when he went into particulars about the amount of accommodation at the Court, together with its dilapidation, and tried to make out without direct inquiry when and to what extent Lady Jones had made acquaintance with Oxcleeve.

She at once admitted the acquaintance. 'Oh yes! I have been in the village, I have seen the Court.' But, beyond the slight amendment, 'It was not of late years,' he could get nothing further out of her. She was not a child or a simpleton, or a genial, effusive person, ready to take anybody or everybody into her confidence, though she had apparently confided to some extent

in Mrs. Reynolds. She did not look shy or timid, but she was not to be induced to furnish him with information about herself in much more than monosyllables. She left him under the impression not only that she knew her own mind, but that she could keep her own counsel. Possibly she was one of those naturally close, secretive women who are disposed to make mysteries of trifles; but this conclusion did not agree with the general impression she produced upon her neighbours, as not a small-minded person, or with the perfect simplicity and candour with which she stated, in a few words, what she could do without and what she absolutely wanted in her future dwelling. There were no petty concealments, no provoking withholding of her real views to the last moment, any more than there was any halting indecision. 'Oh yes! two public rooms will do quite well,' in answer to Mrs. Reynolds's doubt on the subject. 'Three bedrooms which can be made fit for use are amply sufficient. I suppose among the outhouses there will be found accommodation for a pony-carriage and pair of ponies, since I do not walk well?'

'Dear Lady Jones, don't you think you ought to make it a carriage at once?' said Mrs. Reynolds with quite eager persuasiveness, indicating to one at least of her two listeners the lively perception she had of the personal advantages which might accrue to Mrs. Reynolds from Lady Jones's carriage. 'It is sometimes such a mistake, and cripples one so not to begin with the proper thing at once. Our principal roads are not too bad for a carriage with good springs. My sister, Mrs. Barnes, never finds them so; indeed, I speak from my own experience, for her carriage is always at my command—as much mine as hers. Only think of the comfort to yourself in paying visits and going out in the evening.'

'I pay very few visits, and hardly ever go out in the evening,' declared the widow of Sir Benjamin Jones in the most matter-of-fact tone.

'Oh, you must not shut yourself up—your friends cannot let you do so!' remonstrated Mrs. Reynolds, in tones of authority and experience. 'We owe it to ourselves, no less than to our friends—indeed, I go so far as to say that we owe it to our dear departed—not to suffer ourselves, however tempted, to mope and pine away in our grief.'

The notion of anybody so large, well-to-do looking, and well dressed as Mrs. Reynolds pining away was incongruous; but Lady Jones kept her countenance, while she gave another turn to the conversation. 'Besides,' she said, 'a carriage would be quite out of keeping with my small establishment. I shall bring down two maid-servants from London, and I depend upon getting a boy here to take care of the ponies.'

She looked at George, who said 'Certainly.' After the manner in which Mrs. Reynolds had tormented him for the last

hour he was malicious enough to derive some gratification from seeing the lady baffled for once. Without doubt, Lady Jones was not going to keep a carriage for Mrs. Reynolds's benefit, which was to belong as much to Mrs. Reynolds as to Lady Jones herself.

'And now about the repairs,' said Lady Jones practically, at the same time with an abrupt vagueness, and as if she were in a feverish haste to complete the bargain in some fashion. 'Will you get them done for me?'

'Certainly,' said George again, 'if you wish it, and if you will give me your directions.'

Self-reliant as he found her, there was also to him in her tone a curious mixture of the woman who had been used to rule and the woman who had been used to depend, while there was not a particle of the insinuating blandness which Mrs. Reynolds would have put into such a suggestion.

Then George Fielding felt it incumbent upon him, leaving Jem Endicott and his interests out of sight, to intimate to Lady Jones, as she was a woman and he was a man, as she was a stranger and he was a native, that he thought she might make a better bargain elsewhere. He could not say positively what the rent of the Court would be without consulting Mr. Endicott, but he stated what was the rent paid by Gentleman Granaway; not without a private note. 'My friend Jem is equal to trying to get a considerable rise on it if he thinks she is bent on occupying the tumble-down old place, but I must resist him in common honesty since she is to make all the outlay.' He said aloud that the rent previously paid might sound low to her, but she must take into consideration the money which had to be spent to put the old house in order, money which, as she was not buying the Court, she was investing in another man's property. It was not merely quite possible but very probable that she would not like the house or the kind of life which could be led at Oxcleeve after she had got a lease of the Court and taken possession of it. The village was remote, not easily accessible, and, as a place of residence in reference to domestic and social considerations, highly inconvenient.

'Oh, Mr. Fielding! to turn traitor to Oxcleeve's cause and mine!' cried Mrs. Reynolds dramatically. 'Think how you will rue it when you find you have cost me not a congenial neighbour merely, but a valued friend—may I not say, dear Lady Jones?—and Oxcleeve a generous benefactress. I foresee it, I feel convinced of it.'

But Lady Jones only smiled her fleeting smile, which was yet expressive enough, for though she was but a sketch in black and white, there was nothing insipid or vacant about her. 'Thanks,' she said briefly to both; and to George, 'I know all that you have said, I have made up my mind.'

'That means,' he thought, 'I can take care of myself. I

don't want your advice. I will only avail myself of your aid when it suits me. Well, I have cleared my conscience, and she ought not to be a chicken with that grey hair.' The conclusion nettled him a little, yet on the whole he liked Lady Jones, all the more, perhaps, because she puzzled him.

'I am so glad,' said Mrs. Reynolds effusively. Then she told George, with her colossal airiness, 'I am glad, too, though you don't deserve it, sir, that we have to do with you in settling the affair and not with Mr. Jem Endicott. I declare, though people are always pitying him, and though he may be a great improvement on his ruffian of a father——'

'Oh! come now, Mrs. Reynolds, you are going a great deal too far!' said George Fielding, looking much annoyed. 'Not only am I here acting for Jem Endicott, the Endicotts were old friends of mine.'

'I am sorry for you then,' said Mrs. Reynolds, as she shook her head in an impressive manner. 'You must have had the worst of it, though, of course, it is all right for you to stand up for them since you have been so long connected with them in business. But you do not mean that you ever could have been a friend of those dreadful old Endicotts?—the present set are bad enough, but the past are beyond mentioning. They were all gone, I am thankful to say, before I came to Oxcleeve, but I have heard enough of them.'

Lady Jones had turned her face a little away. She did not give the smallest sign of interest, so that he was under the impression she was not listening to what did not concern her. He could therefore reply with greater freedom. 'Yes,' he said stoutly, 'I knew them all perfectly well, and I can bear witness, though it is not saying much, that they were none of them half so black as they were painted. Even old Hugh Endicott, who was the worst, might have been a better man if he had had a better chance. But the poor beggar was unfortunate from the beginning in everything connected with him—in his original temper; in his lot in life, living away in the wilds where he was king of his company when a young man, and where he was at the same time driven in upon himself; unfortunate in every enterprise he ever undertook; unfortunate in his wife, in his very daughter.'

'Well, I have always heard that you were a champion of hers,' said Mrs. Reynolds, who liked gossip and was not troubled with delicacy. 'It is news to find that you must have given her up with the rest of the world; very justifiable, I must say, when she ran away with her disgraced mother, and that other person—there is no need to say more,' ended Mrs. Reynolds, suddenly becoming scrupulous and mealy-mouthed.

'I have never believed that she went with that other person, as you are pleased to indicate him,' said George Fielding indignantly, 'or with anybody save her miserable mother. I have

never changed my opinion of the innocence of the daughter. But she was a high-spirited girl, and she was entirely on her mother's side. She was not fit to judge the right and the wrong in the case, or the faults on both sides; though I admit the man's faults were the more flagrant.'

'I cannot agree with you when the woman's offences were simply unmentionable,' objected Mrs. Reynolds, with her head in the air, and an involuntary shake of her rustling garments, as if she were shaking the dust from them.

'All I meant to say,' persisted George, for once in his life talking this particular opponent down, 'was that Hugh Endicott, hard as he was, might have been more influenced by a softer-natured girl, and one who was less his adversary. Jem was at school. The other girls were mere children of whom he was fond. For that matter, I can remember when he was both fond and proud of his daughter Joanna.'

'I beg your pardon, but are we not wasting our time?' Lady Jones suddenly interrupted them. Indeed, she looked whiter than ever, with weariness and impatience written in every line of her face, while there was a sparkle in her eyes that called her companions to order and forbade further delay. She got up and came to the table to recall everybody to the business in hand, and examine the paper George Fielding had laid down, on which he had been jotting rapidly, in the middle of the conversation, rough notes of the repairs which would be required. When she began to move she stumbled slightly, and he started forward instinctively to help her.

Her first impulse was clearly to waive him off; but she thought better of it, and touched his arm slightly for a second to steady herself, before looking at him with a world more gratitude in her glance than his trifling service called for, bending her head to thank him, and taking the chair that he offered her.

'I am tired with the journey,' she apologised; 'I am not generally so—so infirm.' She smiled again at the word which, though her face and hair were white, contrasted almost ludicrously with her bright quick eyes, smooth forehead, and supple nervous hands. 'Only I do not walk well since I was very ill once, up at a farm in the bush. But I can get about a house in general without difficulty. I am not usually a burden either to myself or my neighbours.' Again there was a tightening of the lips—possibly to prevent any risk of a quiver in them being detected.

'My dear Lady Jones, how can you say such a thing? A burden! Anything save a burden,' protested Mrs. Reynolds enthusiastically. 'Why, you were an example to us all at Miss Jebb's—first at prayers, first at breakfast, able to drive here and there, to shop and work and read, never resting, never idle—which was very, very naughty of you,' and Mrs. Reynolds laughed in a nice balance between a titter and a giggle.

'Oh, I am strong enough,' said Lady Jones carelessly; 'I can do a good deal—only I don't walk well,' she repeated, emphasising the statement as if she clung to it almost like a catch-word: whether to make it serve as an excuse for any peculiarity in her bearing and behaviour, whether to let it stand for a marked feature in her individuality by which she was not unlikely to be pointed out and did not object to be distinguished, as in the phrase 'Lady Jones, who does not walk well,' George Fielding could not satisfy himself.

'When do you think the Court can be ready for me?' she asked him presently, hurrying him in the preliminary steps. Then, as a reason for pressing the point, she explained something of her situation to him, with that element of simple frankness in the middle of her reticence which had in it to him a strain not only of forlorn humour, but of pathos, more striking still in a mature woman than it would have been in a girl. 'I have been nearly two years home from Australia. It is time I settled down—don't you think so?'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Reynolds with her elaborate playfulness, 'you waited to make my acquaintance, you stayed till you had the benefit of my advice before you did anything. It was I who reminded you of the moor and Oxcleeve, and said the best word I could for them, unlike Mr. Fielding there. Though I am not a vain woman, I must really take the credit of having decided your choice.'

'Yes, you were the first person who spoke to me of the village and the moor after I came back,' said Lady Jones, with what would have been discomfiting precision and matter-of-factness had there not also been a ring of honest obligation and genuine gratitude in her voice.

Lady Jones was not to get away without suffering a little further detention from her proper business through the supposed necessity for discussing the affairs of the Endicotts of Blackhall, one of whom, as the owner of the Court, was to be her future landlord. It was George Fielding who began it this time. He raised the question whether Mr. Endicott had not better call on his future tenant and settle matters personally with her; but the suggestion was dismissed on the information being given that Lady Jones was not to make any stay at the 'Three Foxes' in Ashford—not even till she could have Mr. Endicott's answer to her offer, she was to return by the first train to London.

'I have done everything in my power to overturn this foolish plan,' said Mrs. Reynolds, quite in an injured accent. 'I have said all I could to get my friend to come to me and pay me as long a visit as she can spare me. It would be quite a charity to me, and she could see what was going on at her future house and tell exactly what she wished at every stage of the repairs and decorations. But she will not hear of it,' complained the hospitable woman plaintively.

'You are very kind, but it cannot be,' said Lady Jones. She spoke not merely with firmness but with positive peremptoriness. It was as if, though she could be grateful for proffered kindness, she shrank unconquerably from intruding her personality and her infirmity on her acquaintance. 'I do not wish to come down again till I can go to my own house.'

'The loss is mine,' said Mrs. Reynolds, with magnanimous graciousness. 'But as for Mr. Jem Endicott, I suppose he is rather glad to get off from his part in the programme. He is becoming a perfect boor between being so badly off and such a miser. I am told he is developing fast, for such a young man, into a regular skinflint; that he grudges his sisters the very bread they eat.'

'Are you speaking of the family at Blackhall, the family of the gentleman who is to be my landlord—if he will consent?' inquired Lady Jones, awaking suddenly to the curiosity in which she had been wanting before, and fixing startled, earnest eyes on the speaker.

'Yes, but you will forgive me for saying you are speaking nonsense, Mrs. Reynolds,' said George Fielding steadily. 'You have got hold of some of the stupid, absurd stories that are circulated in every country neighbourhood. Poor Jem Endicott is doing his best against heavy odds, and what can you ask more? You cannot expect him to be particularly bland and winning in the circumstances. There is no use in hiding that he is hard up, and has to deny himself many things, including the amenities of society. He does not hide it himself; but if it had rested with him he never would have been reduced to such straits, and if it rests with him still, and he has fair play, he may free himself in time. With regard to his sisters, I say he is doing the best he can for them, as well as for himself, instead of starving them. Good heavens! It is too preposterous. Why don't you say beating and murdering them while you are about it?' demanded George with lively scorn.

'Upon my word, you are an excellent ally,' said Mrs. Reynolds, permitting herself a sneer. 'But if Mr. Jem Endicott does the best he can for his sisters, why has he made no attempt to fit up that gloomy stripped old hole, so as to have rendered it decently habitable—I do not mean for them to have received company in, as that would have been out of the question under the circumstances, but so that the friends of the family—such as are left—might have visited the girls and been visited by them in return?'

George Fielding shrugged his shoulders. 'Well,' he said, 'you know best what ladies expect from a man and a brother. But you will admit there is a difference between an unfortunate fellow—who has not a shilling to spare if he is to pay the debts, not of his contracting, but crushing him all the same—refurnish-

ing his house for his sisters' pleasure, and his not giving them bread to eat?'

Mrs. Reynolds passed over the distinction and proceeded to another charge: 'And if he cares for his sisters, why does he turn them over to Tony North's attentions? *Tête-à-tête* scrambling and fishing—shooting, too, for aught that I can tell, would have been considered unmaidenly enough in my unmarried days; but strolls in the twilight and the moonlight by the Bar and up to the Tor with Tony North for an escort, after the way their mother and sister went!' with exaggerated horror. 'Dear Mr. Fielding, forgive me, since the brother is a client of yours; but what is he thinking of? He cannot keep these girls under too strict control; if he only reflected, their names ought never to be in the public mouth. It does look as if the young man were perfectly indifferent as to what became of the young women, and were only too glad to get quit of them in any fashion, creditable or discreditable.'

Mrs. Reynolds was one of those righteous elderly women who make the fact of their never having strayed by a hair's breadth from the path—not to say of virtue, but of decorum—a triumphant warrant for the severity of their censure on the follies of younger women.

George Fielding shrugged his shoulders uneasily again, and then he muttered a halting defence. 'Oh no; not so bad as that! I dare say Endicott does not heed or does not believe what people say, if a syllable of it ever reaches his ears. I know he is inclined to set ordinary rules at defiance where he himself is concerned. As for these poor girls, they are young and thoughtless, and left to themselves.'

'But I don't understand who or what you are speaking about,' broke in Lady Jones, with a touch of imperiousness in the tones which had been hitherto perfectly unassuming in their greatest self-reliance and decision. 'Who is Tony North? What about the girls at Blackhall—the squire's sisters?' she asked confusedly.

'There are two of them, my dear Lady Jones,' explained Mrs. Reynolds suavely, 'Celia and Lucy Endicott. Not at all nice young ladies, I am sorry to say, not desirable acquaintances; neither you nor I will be much the better for their vicinity. I did call first when they came because I considered it my duty in my position, and because my poor dear husband was one of the friends of the family. But, though I meant to take up the girls so far as to lend them a little of my countenance in spite of the clownishness of the brother, I had to give up the idea. I could not continue to cultivate them, or run any risk of bringing them in contact with the dear Barnes Clyffe girls—innocent, well-brought-up young people—my sister's children, for whom I am bound to be doubly careful. But as you were not here when the Miss Endicotts came, luckily you

are not compromised. The initiative of calling rests with them —at least, that is our rule in England; I do not know whether it holds good in Australia—and, should they call, if I were you, I should simply not return the call.'

'But what have they done?' insisted Lady Jones. 'I am no caller, but that does not matter; what have these girls done that they ought not to be visited?'

'Well, that is putting it a little too strongly,' admitted Mrs. Reynolds, yielding a point; 'and it would be too long and painful a story, which it would be impossible to discuss fully here,' with a meaning glance at George Fielding, 'were I to try to explain why the Endicott girls would not be in very good odour, even if they did nothing wrong. I may just mention,' went on Mrs. Reynolds gingerly, as if she were metaphorically drawing in her skirts, 'that their mother and elder sister were two quite dreadful women, who eloped from the husband of the one and the father of the other in the worst company.'

'Are you aware that there is no authority for the latter part of your statement?' said George Fielding in a low tone, with a sternness which was a great contrast to the ordinary half-kindly, half-lazy forbearance of his manner.

Mrs. Reynolds either did not hear or paid no attention to him. She continued, with a comfortable sense of being very far removed from such depravity, 'Terrible, was it not—a double infamy? It made a shocking scandal in the neighbourhood before I came to Oxcleeve,' as if her coming would have prevented the scandal.

Lady Jones opened her lips as if to say something, then closed them again, and at last spoke deliberately. 'The sins of the fathers visited on the children unto the third and fourth generation,' she said slowly; 'but I thought that was a Jewish and not a Christian decree.'

'Part of one of the commandments, is it not?' Mrs. Reynolds reminded her companion sweetly; not without suffering herself to show a shade of astonishment and distress, as the daughter of a clergyman of high standing, at the lamentable ignorance and lax orthodoxy of her new friend. 'And you see it was not the parents alone, there was also the sister—who might have taken warning—to show they were a bad lot. If they had been anything else, would not these girls and their brother for them have used every precaution to keep out of mischief, so that the family reputation, sullied enough already, might not be so much as breathed on again in their persons?'

'And have they not done so?' inquired Lady Jones coldly.

'Very far from it,' cried Mrs. Reynolds, with something like exultation at the justification of her theory. 'Instead of that, what these inconceivably reckless, regardless young people have done has been on the principle of like drawing to like. The girls are seen running about at all hours with the only fast young

man who can be found hereabouts, I am glad to say. He is a cousin of our excellent vicar's. Mr. North is only too forbearing and longsuffering with his relative, while he is in no way responsible for the black sheep in his fold. I am sure it is a great distress to the poor dear vicar that Tony North should have struck up a friendship with the Endicotts—with the girls I mean, for I do not think that the misanthropist Jem unbends to any company except what he meets in the "Furze Bush." I can speak with authority where the vicar's feelings are concerned, for I thought it my duty to give him a hint of what was going on, and that it was in everybody's mouth. I must say I never saw a man look more cut up and annoyed.'

'Excuse me, but I think we have had enough of this, Mrs. Reynolds,' said George Fielding almost rudely, for his hard-taxed patience was on the verge of giving way. 'I'm afraid Lady Jones is sick of our local gossip and petty scandal. If we don't take care we'll drive her away before she has settled down among us.'

This threat, for which there appeared some grounds in Lady Jones's wearied, discomposed looks, had its effect. Mrs. Reynolds left the subject of the enormities of the Endicotts, such arrangements as could be entered upon, subject to Jem Endicott's approval, were concluded, and George Fielding took his leave.

'Rather a singular and striking tenant to have turned up for the poor old Court,' George reflected, with the interest of a student of human nature who has come on a fresh type. 'Can't make her out. Why she should look at once so old and so young is a puzzle in itself. Perhaps she is a growth of the new world in our greatest colony; not an objectionable growth, nothing barbaric or gorgeous about her, after all, rather naïve and inscrutable—a mixture of the two; not a bad sort it seems to me, and not at all the style of that intolerable wind-bag, humbug, and scandal-monger, Mrs. Reynolds. My tongue is not so much better than hers, I find, but I don't think I ever heard her so bad as she was to-day. How on earth did those two scrape a friendship even in a London boarding-house as I was told, and how long and on what terms will they hang together?'

CHAPTER VII.

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY AT BLACKHALL.

Blackhall outside the front door was little changed. The old grey manor-house—half manor-house, half farmhouse from the beginning—could stand a good many more of Time's ravages, and show few additional signs of decay. Nearly as much could be said of the little garden which was all that represented pleasure-grounds—unless, indeed, the poor squire of Blackhall claimed

his portion of the great brown or purple moor as an indomitable Scotch laird once assumed the suzerainty of the Pentland Frith, in order to get the better of an Englishman who had twitted his northern acquaintance with the inferiority of his 'policy.' The grass-plot with the sundial, the holly-stack, the half-dozen hardy shrubs, even the old-fashioned ruby-sprinkled fuchsia saplings which formed the hedges flanking the porch, that to a lively fancy glittered from June to October, as if they were set with jewels, survived intact. The garden was not altered by so much as the repair of the broken iron nose of the sundial or the pruning of the upper story of the holly. The lower variegated section in its antiquity and slower growth still kept its prosaic stack shape, while the intruding, wild dark-green shoot above hung over like a penthouse, and at the same time towered aloft in a profusion of strong branches which had already reached a sufficiently respectable and independent age for the leaves to begin to propose a truce by dropping their prickles, and the stalks to be every winter more and more generous and bountiful in consenting to be crusted and double-crusted with clusters of scarlet berries.

But within doors there was not so much the old dilapidation as positive desolation. The mildewed weather-stained hall and the passages, smelling of damp and cobwebs, were devoid of furniture, just as they had been left a good many years before when Hugh Endicott was sold up. There were not half-a-dozen rooms furnished, and that in the barest manner, in the whole house. These included the kitchen and an adjoining room in which the elderly farm-man and his elderly wife, the entire staff of house-servants, slept, a couple of bedrooms, and a nondescript sitting-room. Had it not been for the last the whole place, together with the habits of its inmates, might have been held to have fallen back into the primitive yeoman character of the original dwelling, and the dwellers within its bounds. There was still a sprinkling of these strong, solid, rough, yeoman homesteads, with their single house-place and their limited number of sleeping-rooms standing in the middle of their offices, the manure heap, and the duck-pond below the windows, the goose-green—the single distant approach to a place of recreation—within reach, on the edge of the moor.

But the sitting-room at Blackhall, no less than the three-cornered lawn with the sundial and holly-stack, removed it from this class. There were a few traces of higher culture present, in the absence of any distinctive sign which could indicate either dining-room or drawing-room. Jem Endicott still read the newspapers and a book occasionally. There was a newspaper and a volume on his common deal desk. The drugget on the floor was of the coarsest description, the rug was of ordinary sheepskin. But somebody had worked various semi-artistic, semi-follish mats for the coal-scuttle to stand on, to lie in the

window recesses, to keep the draught from the door. There were half-pretty, half-idiotic cushions of a similar description on the strong old pine-wood chairs, acquired at some sale of aboriginal furniture.

Oddly enough, there was a piano, a jingling rattlepan, for its history was that it had belonged to Mrs. Hugh Endicott. It had been claimed for her daughters on the breaking up of the establishment, when the younger children were taken away by her relatives; and little worth as the musical instrument was, it had been punctiliously sent back to Blackhall with Celia and Lucy when they were finally thrown on their brother's hands. Small as might be the harmony drawn from that rosewood box, there was an air of faded gentility about its yellowing ivory keys and painted soundboard. In the stand beside the piano was an array of music-books in frayed morocco binding. There were bookshelves in another recess not so well furnished, filled with odd volumes that looked as if they had strayed there, for some of them belonged to expensive editions bound in Russian leather heavy with gilding. Two little satin-lined work-baskets with lace frills and riband bows—cheap enough affairs, no doubt, but having a dainty, if not a frivolous air—stood on the oak table. There was a wooden flower-stand, home-made and home-painted—in fact, knocked together by Beaver, the farm servant, 'to pleasure one of the tew young misses,' but quite capable of holding half-a-dozen ferns, a lotus lily with its stately green leaves and white trumpet of a flower, a few scarlet geraniums by way of broad contrast, and a minor row of dwarf cacti. These distorted, grotesque-looking examples of the vegetable world, with their slow growth, prickly stolidity, indifference to watering and other delicate attentions, choice memories of sandy wildernesses, and slightly mocking and sardonic expression, have a singular fascination for a certain order of mind. The flowers and ferns which needed to be tended, and repaid loving care by grateful blossoms and fronds, belonged to Lucy Endicott. The cacti, which wanted little or no attention and returned no thanks for house-room, beyond the monkey-like attitudes which their squat, cramped, crooked limbs seemed to take voluntarily, were the property of Celia Endicott.

The half-picturesque but wholly shabby room was not cheerless on a day in early summer, when the keen moorland air, admitted at the open windows, bore on its wings something of the apricot-smelling sweetness of the furze-blossom all around, as well as the scent of the lilac and the may from the morsel of unkempt rugged lawn in front of the house. Perhaps, after all, Blackhall was not barer than many an Italian palace of historic name and fame. Neither were its domestic arrangements simpler or more frugal. But the pity of it was that Italian palaces and their economy are not as a rule familiar to the English middle and lower classes. The habits of a mercurial southern

people, living much in the open air from pleasure no less than from necessity, do not suit the dwellers in a northern region, who are early forced into forethought and diligence and substantial provision for fireside comfort and adornment, according to the station in life of the thinker and worker. A *ménage* of bare boards and threadbareness had no meaning at Oxcleeve save as an indication of pennilessness or sordid quarrelling with established customs. Though there were a few homely yeomen squires surviving in Devonshire, for any man born in Jem Endicott's position to do no more for the reception and entertainment of two young girls, his sisters, fresh from school, than to make them free of such an establishment, argued one of two things. Either he was in more extreme straits than had been supposed, and could find neither money nor credit to employ in the most modest refurnishing of the house, or he was what Mrs. Reynolds had represented him, an unlicked cub; a sour and sulky Timon, who did not think his fellows—especially his social equals—had done well by him and his, and therefore did not wish to ask for their further suffrages—in fact, meant to have no more to do with them than he could help. Something of both of these reasons had to do with Jem's churlish behaviour. He had not the means to give more than the most rough-and-ready mending and re-lining to the house, which had been his father's and was now his own, unless his creditors took it from him, and he did not attempt more than he could not possibly avoid, because under present circumstances he did not care to return to the class and circle from which he had in a great measure dropped. He had no desire for that influx of half-pitying, half-scornful, wholly critical company of old friends and neighbours, of which Mrs. Reynolds had been one of the few *avant-coureurs*. She had implied that the main body would have followed her if Jem Endicott had shown any right feeling for himself and proper consideration for his female relations in the light of their sex, gentle breeding, and future prospects, which hung in the balance. Jem was simply struggling to pay the debts his father had left to him together with a blighted name, because the younger man was ruggedly honest, no doubt, but also to defy and get the better of those who distrusted him. Either he was destitute of the ambition, for which he had been given a certain amount of credit, to redeem his fortunes in order to return to the ranks of the moorland squirearchy, more than partially closed to him, or, under the prolonged difficulty of the heavy task he had undertaken, the ambition was becoming rapidly stamped out of him.

In some respects Jem, more than any other of his family, unless his sister Joanna, had been the scapegoat of the sins and sorrows of his predecessors. He had been old enough, even when he was a boy at school, to understand something of the reproach which clung to his name, and to have it branded into him. He had come back to face the lingering obloquy of his

mother's and sister's disgrace, his father's shame and ruin, in the place where it had all happened.

Jem had endured the ordeal, living on and fighting his battle where the wrong had been done, until he had no wish, or only a faint and fugitive one, to win back what had been lost to him in public consideration and regard. It was well known that, even after his sisters had joined him, he not only rejected with scant courtesy all faltering invitations for him to re-enter the bosoms of the families of his fellow-squires, he took what rest and refreshment he cared for in the sanded parlour of the 'Furze Bush,' the Oxcleeve inn, among the moormen and peasant proprietors of the district. Yet he was never exactly accused of being a lover of low company, for though he was a regular frequenter of the place, it was not as the equal of the other frequenters. He was no sot, or buffoon of a Tony Lumpkin. Indeed, he kept aloof from the inn circle as from other circles. He was temperate enough to have worn the Blue Ribbon. He was proud in his way, and sat apart in the chair which was reserved for his use, nobody interfering with him or even addressing him unless he gave them permission by speaking first. The very landlord, generally cock of his walk, only showed his regard for Jem Endicott, who spent so little on the premises which the young man favoured with his heavy-browed down-looking countenance, by respectfully inviting him into the family room when the front room was crowded with shepherds and moormen, and waiting upon him there as his most honoured guest. Perhaps it was this subtle acknowledgment of his superiority which the poor fellow received nowhere else that was the great charm of the situation. Certainly some of the pleasantest, most restful of young Endicott's not very pleasant or restful life had been spent in the 'Furze Bush' in the arm-chair in the chimney corner, or at the window which looked out on the garden, smoking his pipe, reading his newspaper, watching the customers at the bar, or the passers-by in the village street; or looking out on the garden, where, in the arbour, of a summer evening, little Kitty Carew, the daughter of the widowed innkeeper, would sit, going over her school exercises, preparing her school seams, or running up and correcting the scores of her father's customers. Tom Carew bore a good old Devonshire name, though he had no other claim to gentle birth, and Kitty was such a fine scholar, as well as such a pattern of steadiness, that she was a favourite with the vicar, and had been selected by him at an unusually early age, while still in her teens, to fill the post of his schoolmistress. Her father was so gratified by the compliment that, though he could ill spare his clever, good little girl, his only child, from the double post of mistress and maid which her mother had left vacant, he was fain to find a substitute for Kitty in an elderly female cousin. He did not cast scorn on his inn, which, in those respectable days, was as

little noisy and rough and as free from scandal as an old-fashioned village inn—half inn, half alehouse—could well be. But he took heart of grace, and opened his eyes to the fact that Kitty was safer and happier in the school even than under her father's roof, to which she returned every night. Her position in the school was fitter for her and more honourable and independent than her position in the 'Furze Bush' could have been. If this could be said during his reign as lord and master of the inn, it would be still more true should Kitty survive him and be left without father as well as without mother while the girl was still young and unmarried.

In the mornings at Blackhall Jem Endicott had an early breakfast in company with his sister Lucy. Celia did not often trouble herself to join them. She came down when she was ready, and frequently ate her breakfast in solitude. Jem had a habit, which might have been picked up from examples supplied for his study at the 'Furze Bush,' of satisfying his hunger on hunches of bread eaten with his coffee, while for anything farther he was unswervingly faithful to Sally Beaver's scrambled eggs and rashers of bacon. Celia liked what Sally called 'kickshaws,' which, though they were only bits of toast to her cup of tea, and saucers of fresh-made clotted cream, with such fruit as Sally had been able to preserve during the previous summer, took a little longer to prepare, and when prepared could stand waiting without injury to them. It was, therefore, of less consequence that the elder of the two sisters was often not present at what might be called the family breakfast-table. When Jem rose from it, he generally repaired to his fields or to the moor to inspect his cattle and sheep. The last-mentioned duty sometimes took him long distances, so that he was little within doors. Whoever had followed him would have found a man less in stature than Hugh Endicott, but still a big man with a share of the same strapping comeliness. His rough Tweed suit and battered straw hat did not fit in so badly with it; what really spoilt his looks was his downcast, more or less sullen air. That was something very different from the swaggering joviality and devil-may-careness which had distinguished wild Hugh Endicott in his earlier years.

The two recreations which Jem had reserved for himself were hunting and fishing. He could hardly have been a Devonshire man and not clung to horses and hounds. As for fishing, it afforded him his sole holidays. After he had exhausted the streams and pools in his neighbourhood, he went off every summer when work among the cattle and sheep was slackest. He walked the whole length of his journey and slept in inns like the 'Furze Bush,' or in shepherds' huts, the accommodation of which lent the inns a reflected splendour, and so contrived to afford the expense of his expedition.

But Jem was seen to greatest advantage when he was on

horseback. Horses were no luxury on the vast moor, where a native breed was said to have flourished in the long past. It still maintained many hundreds of strong serviceable ponies. If they were not Katerfeltos, they were at least capable of considerable cultivation. But a man like Jem Endicott, who took a solitary pride in the horse which he often groomed and fed with his own hands, was not content with a moor pony. He indulged in one luxury, and that was his sorrel, 'Dragon.' He was a bold, keen rider, and would sooner clear the gate at Blackhall, horse and all, than take the trouble of alighting to unfasten it. He did not deny himself any chance of following the hounds as he denied himself so much else, though he was glum and unsocial in his hunting as in every other occupation. He made no friendly acquaintances at the meet, and rode home unaccompanied by any cheery comrade in the grey foggy afternoons. But when he came galloping back past the Oxcleeve church and school, across the goose-greens, and down what there was of a village street, scattering the sheep-dogs and the geese before him, he looked to unsophisticated eyes rather a gallant figure. It was as in the old ballad, when the bonnie Earl o' Moray 'cam' sounding through the toun.' The spell was not broken when Jem pulled up at the door of the 'Furze Bush' in order to give, in a gruff word or two, the coveted information of where the fox had been killed, how the scent was holding, and at what place the meet was to be next day. There was a breath of the knight of romance about him then, instead of the broken-down air of the loutish squire of Blackhall.

CHAPTER VIII.

CELIA AND LUCY ENDICOTT.

Not only had Lucy and Jem breakfasted together on a day in question, Celia had finished her breakfast also. Sally Beaver had cleared the table, and the sisters were at liberty to follow their own pursuits. Lucy was looking after her flowers, snipping off the dead leaves, stirring up the earth, and watering the pots from the little can kept below the stand. After this duty was done she would sit down opposite her little work-basket, prepared to occupy herself with its contents, unless Celia called on her to go out or to do something else. For it was Lucy who kept up the sedulously subdued sketchy fancy work she had learned at school, and diligently embroidered in dull colours and skeleton patterns innumerable mats and cushions, when she was not hemming those half-curtains for the bedroom windows which required to be perpetually changed and renewed. Their fleeting character might be partly due to Jem's tearing his down about once a day, and to Beaver, according to Sally, 'a-spiling of hissen with

his great mucky fingers.' Sally's soul was vexed by the getting up of these 'rags o' curtains,' and was in no way soothed by the impartiality with which Lucy dealt out a curtain for the special benefit of Sally and Beaver.

To watch Lucy in the making of those everlasting curtains, which she regarded as a much more serious obligation than the fancy work, one might have been tempted to conclude that the whole duty of woman lay in a nutshell. It was to provide spotless clear-starched curtains which blurred the view from upper windows, that were only looked down upon with difficulty at many yards' distance from the garret windows of one or two cottages at the end of the village.

It was not a very large-minded version of woman's mission, but at least two things could be said for it—it did not fit in with Mrs. Reynolds's wholesale denunciation of the Endicott girls. And it was a great deal better than any theory which permitted what was Lucy's sister Celia's practice, alternations between being furiously busy on her own account and totally idle where the interests of others were concerned.

Celia Endicott was doing nothing at this moment. She was sitting, leaning with her elbows on the table, and her hands clasped under her chin, just as at another moment she would be lying back on the hard unyielding chair, which had not been made for such ease, with her white fingers interlaced above her head, or walking up and down with her arms a-kimbo or her hands clasped behind her back.

Celia and Lucy both bore traces of their descent as strongly after their different fashions as Jem did after his. These Endicotts were what circumstances had made them, which may be said of most of us; but theirs had not been happy circumstances, likely to foster every virtue and grace. It might have been thought that the two girls had been kept out of the family misdeeds and misfortunes. Celia and Lucy had been mere children when the tragedy was wrought out. They had been taken away from the neighbourhood, and their guardians had determined, with a not unmerciful purpose, that the little girls should grow up as ignorant as possible of what it perhaps concerned them more than any one else to know, with regard to certain passages in the family history. So far as anybody interested was aware, nobody had ever spoken to the pair, except to turn aside their childish questions when the events happened, of what had become of Mrs. Endicott and Joanna, and of the latter end of Hugh Endicott. There was an impression among the relations who had assumed the care of Celia and Lucy that they believed their mother and sister as well as their father had died like ordinary persons, only that the first two had been lost to the family by a double sickness and death. It was alleged that Celia, who possessed a lively imagination, had been heard to give a detailed account of their *funeral*. If the true state of the case—either

with regard to Mrs. Endicott and Joanna or to Hugh Endicott—was communicated to the head of the school in which the girls were placed, it was under a seal of secrecy which there was no temptation to break. It was more in the schoolmistress's interest that those family histories of her pupils which were not altogether creditable should remain hidden in oblivion, than that they should be picked to pieces by a censorious public. Neither was there any great likelihood that in the crude school gossip—an immature reflection of the gossip of the world—the girls' fellow-pupils would give out garbled editions of the truth in spurts of malice, within hearing of the victims. Yet the two knew perfectly, though they did not speak of it directly even to each other, the outline of their story—knew it as well and with as great an effect upon them as if they had lived in the midst of it, or as if it had been inhumanly dinned into their ears after the fashion in which, in the old days, their father had kept savagely reminding their mother of her meditated transgression. The single beneficial result of the silence which had been preserved on the subject, silence which was in itself a blight and a terror, appeared in the wholesome shame which enveloped the past more or less where the surviving members of the family were concerned. None of them would lightly venture to overleap the nameless barriers and rake up the ashes of dead fires, among themselves, in the privacy of such a home as they shared, not to say in public to an audience of strangers. Not even Celia would openly attack the old ugly scandal, though she was quite capable of nibbling at it, and making her own of it, under the rose, with Jem and Lucy—particularly with Lucy.

Celia had been hardened, and not softened, by the trial in which she had perforce borne a part. She was, in her precociously womanly way, even more of an Ishmaelite than Jem was believed to be, with her hand still more against every woman than his was against every man. Yet she never in a straightforward manner mentioned her mother and elder sister any more than her father to Jem and Lucy. Something kept her back. She was not so sure now that the two whose sensational funeral she had evolved from her childish consciousness were dead, though she certainly hoped they were. She did not in the least know what had become of them, and she would not inquire, any more than Jem or Lucy would ask tidings of those who were dead to them. Celia indemnified herself for the self-restraint, whenever she chose, in her intercourse with her sister. Frequently, when the two were alone together, though rarely before strangers, she made biting allusions to the family history, and drew cutting deductions in a spirit of defiance, either of bitter mockery or of angry rebellion. But it was also true that even in the glittering metallic gaiety of her lighter moods she used the knowledge which had come to her in such an intangible manner, as a weapon in her armoury, with which she could deal cruel wounds in sheer

sport. Unhappily for Celia Endicott's relations and friends, to inflict mental pain on the persons nearest to her, when the mood was upon her, appeared a necessity of her nature, adding zest to her pleasure and comforting her in vexation. Whether in her strange idiosyncrasy she realised the suffering she caused, is a totally different matter. Unquestionably her eyes only sparkled more brightly or blazed more fiercely for the spectacle of her sister Lucy listening to her with a white face, trembling lips, and scared eyes.

It may be judged, naturally enough, that with these uncomfortable characteristics Celia Endicott was an unpopular person, detested and shunned by all with whom she came in contact. It depended on the closeness of the contact, and the nature of the people involved in it. There was a self-sufficing potentiality about her which recommended her to an overburdened world, especially to people of weaker character than her own. She did not complain, or impose her troubles and injuries on anybody, save, indeed, on her sister Lucy. Though Celia would not go out into the world and work for her maintenance, she could look after and take care of herself in a way which conveyed an impression, perfectly correct, that she was ridding her neighbours of a considerable burden which they must otherwise have borne. She was almost always gay; and there is so much sorrow in the world that gaiety of any kind is apt to be welcome, especially to unreflecting spirits. When it suited her she had a superficial *bonhomie*, which was her most obvious quality to an outer circle in whose estimation she stood fairly well—far before Lucy. By force of circumstances the sisters had few acquaintances, while Celia at least had no desire for female friends. The circle referred to consisted chiefly of not over-particular onlookers, many of whom were inclined to condone such errors as were laid to Celia's charge, and to think rather favourably of her.—'Poor, handsome, high-spirited Miss Endicott, nothing sly about *her*. She had a great deal to live down for which she was not accountable; she was wasting her youth in a remote moorland village with a lout and screw of a brother and a demure puss of a sister who was not the image of her mother for nothing. Miss Endicott's jests and laughter were quite creditable to her.'

'Well, what is to be the order of the day, Lucy?' asked Celia carelessly, over her clasped hands; 'are we to fall asleep and dream for a hundred years, in order to be awakened by two romantic fools of princes at last? Or, what would be better still, I dare say, shall we go down hand in hand to the Bar, plunge in, and, as we were never taught to swim like the heroines of American novels, rid Jem of the burden of two such useless ornaments as we are, and have done with this unsatisfactory world at once?'

'How can you say such horrible things, Celia?' cried Lucy, hastily putting down her watering-can, and pressing back her

yellow hair from both sides of her forehead, as much distressed and scandalised as if the hearing of such horrible things was altogether new to her. 'You know it is a sin even to jest of what would be a great crime. You speak as if Jem, our own brother, did not care for us.'

'Good little girl, who has profited by her vicar's last sermon! And what a pity the parson cannot hear her! for I am afraid her high moral tone would be lost on his cousin Tony, as it is on unworthy me, I am sorry to say,' said Celia, bent on tormenting Lucy in lieu of bigger game. 'And so Jem cares for us, does he? I must say that is news to me, though he is our brother. It looks very much like it, doesn't it?' and she glanced contemptuously round the room—poverty-stricken and picturesque.

'Well, what would you have?' protested Lucy, showing the same ready disposition to tears which had been conspicuous in her mother. 'You know Jem is very poor, yet he has taken us in, and does not propose to turn us out. He does not ask us to relieve him by going out into the world as governesses or companions. He does not expose us to any other cruel reverse which we were not born and brought up to.'

It was clear from Lucy's manner and from her not very logical speech that she was not in the least familiar with the dignities or the charms of the higher education for women. Indeed, the girls had been brought up in an old-fashioned second-rate school, and though even second-rate schools are a good deal better now than they were wont to be, and the Endicotts had been well enough taught in the ordinary branches of a tolerably liberal education, with the usual list of accomplishments, the idea of pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake, or of entering upon independent careers, was as foreign to them as it would have been to their grandmother. Lucy could not have compassed such a career, though it had been brought before her in its most alluring form. Celia might, but her nimble wits had been turned in a very different direction—to getting what enjoyment and amusement she could out of life, since it did not appear to her that she was likely to get much else, and to paying back in her own fashion the disdain and neglect with which she was persuaded the world was prepared to treat her and her sister.

Celia resembled her father personally, though she was neither like her brother Jem nor her sister Joanna, both of whom had displayed their father's traits in different styles. Celia looked as if she ought to have been tall, with her broad shoulders and long arms, but somehow she failed in height; she was rather shorter than Lucy. It was as if the blast of adversity which had blighted her fortunes and perverted her nature had also in a degree stunted her physically. Not that there was the slightest lack of health or even of bodily harmony in Celia's lack of height; on the contrary, there was something not merely vigorous but *agreeable to* look upon in her square shoulders, together with

the erectness and elasticity of her carriage and gait. Her figure, which the tightly fitting jerseys and plain skirts she generally wore suited admirably, did more than give an impression of power, it suggested a certain robust grace born of power. In spite of her fits of laziness she was, when she liked, as indefatigable and unsurpassable a walker as her sister Joanna had been; she was good at all games which demanded cool skill and enduring strength. She would have been an excellent tennis player and dancer, only she hardly ever got the opportunity. Her face was handsome, like all the Endicott faces; but in place of the gloom which had darkened some of them, hers was set in lines of hard aggressive brightness and lurking malice; not the mindless mischief of a child, but the sardonic mockery of a woman who knows herself hopelessly in the wrong by no doing of hers, and keenly resents her fate. In her bitterness Celia Endicott determined to indemnify herself for what she had missed by throwing off all allegiance to society and doing what she pleased. She laughed in the faces of those who groaned and held up their hands at her conduct; in fact, the deeper the groans, the higher the hands held up, the greater was her disdainful, distempered enjoyment. For withal there was something erratic in this girl and her doings—something abnormal—a mixture of the stealthy, relentless wild cat, and the mowing, mocking monkey. In spite of her vigour of mind and body, there was evidence of a mental as well as a moral twist in her composition.

There was no mistake as to what predecessor Lucy Endicott took after. She was the image of her mother in her younger days—the slender fairness, the yellow hair, the round blue eyes, the small white teeth, the expression of shallowness, irresolution, and timidity, verging on cravenness—all were reproduced in the daughter. Lucy's very style of dress, allowing for the changes in fashions, had an affinity to what had been her mother's style, though the younger woman had never been in circumstances to be smart, and neither had she descended to being slovenly. But there was something flowing and fluttering, girlishly, if forlornly, dainty and gay in Lucy's shabby frocks, and in the trimmings of her jackets and hats. Her very slippers had been worked in beads by her own ingenuity, and her handkerchief was apt to be a rag of muslin with a coloured border. Lucy had not taken in at a glance, as Celia had done, how unsuitable such toilets were for Blackhall and the great moor; and simply to suit her own convenience, not at all in deference to the opinions of others, modified and altered what needed modification and alteration. But as for Lucy, she never took a walk on the moor without tearing her trimmings, or crossed the brooks without sticking among the stones, and having those absurd boots of hers all but wrenched apart. She would come home with her light sunshade shockingly soiled, her lace veil rent, her silk gloves in holes—her entire self a depressed, deplorable, and laughable object.

However, Lucy Endicott's early experience had been altogether different from Mrs. Endicott's. There had been no fostering of her small vanities, no vulgarising of any delicacy of mind which belonged to her, no frittering away of any sweetness and kindness that was native to the girl in false sentiment and silly flirtations. There had not been any undermining of her sense of duty by accustoming her to a low standard of truth and honour, any withdrawing of all responsibility and obligation, any launching of her on an endless round of petty visiting with which she was perpetually distracted, till her not very wise head was fairly turned.

On the contrary, the butterfly had been under the wheel; and the fact of its remaining uncrushed furnished a faint hope that it was not a mere butterly after all, but an immortal creature that might rise to immortal heights under salutary discipline and wise training. There was something innocent and childlike still in poor Lucy's confiding, appealing blue eyes, something loyal in her frightened attempts to propitiate Jem and do trifles for him in return for the shelter he gave her and Celia; some thing that had merit in it in the persistent way in which she stitched on, without any encouragement, at those trumpery little mats and cushions which she was persuaded made the place look better, and was accomplishing something for the others. She would even have tried to help Sally Beaver, who was not absolutely saucy or harsh where 'them tew boarding-school misses' were concerned, and had, indeed, rather a liking for Lucy, though Sally could not refrain from grumbling at the additional work the sisters had brought upon her. But unfortunately Lucy's school, with its French governess and music and drawing masters, had not imparted to her the slightest elementary knowledge on the subjects of bedmaking and cooking, whereas it had impressed on her a dread of losing caste—a horror of 'anything menial.' The demons of selfishness and self-will had not to this day taken possession of Lucy. Her nature was like wax in its plasticity; any little reaction of stubbornness which she possessed was easily overcome by playing on her want of self-reliance and her abounding fears. Her character was very much of a blank at present, but that was a good deal better than being covered over with evil symbols, for it was just possible that it might yet be inscribed with fair handwriting.

CHAPTER IX.

GRIEVANCES.

Celia and Lucy Endicott had been together all their lives, with the exception of the year in which Celia claimed the seniority. The bond of daily and hourly familiarity was between them.

There was in addition the stronger bond—very strong in the case of Lucy—of having nobody else to depend upon and turn to in the light of a companion who had an equal share in all her fortunes and misfortunes. For Jem and the sisters were comparative strangers to each other. They had grown up apart. They had never owned any call to correspond with each other, save in the most formal perfunctory schoolboy and schoolgirl manner. They had hardly met in the interval between their separation and the date at which Celia and Lucy came back unsolicited to Blackhall, to establish even such artificial temporary relations as existed between them. Jem had not taken kindly to his sisters. He submitted to their presence because he did not know how to prevent it; but they were an obstacle and encumbrance in a path already heavily enough burdened. In truth, he did not know what to do with the 'tew boarding-school misses,' as Sally defined them and as Jem regarded them—a pair of useless fine ladies thrown on his hands. He could not in his manliness, and in what strain of a gentleman was left in him, bid them take themselves off and maintain themselves in some fashion, but he heartily wished they would do so. He resented alike Lucy's transparent awe of him—the idea of anybody standing in awe of a miserable beggar like him!—and bungling efforts to help him, and Celia's easy independence, high spirits, and sly sarcasm.

Celia was not without some condescending, matter-of-course liking for Lucy; but it was mingled with a supreme contempt for her sister's weakness, and overshadowed by Celia's reckless self-assertion, and by the motives which prompted her deliberately to trample her neighbours' feelings and interests under foot, for the furtherance of her own ends—even of her idle amusement.

Over Lucy, Celia had all the overwhelming influence of strength over weakness; of a domineering, unscrupulous temper in relation to another hopelessly yielding, full of whys and wherefores, of 'Can't I do it's?' or 'Shall I not do it's?'

Lucy had just accomplished a little stand against her sister on the heinous impropriety of making a jest on committing suicide, and of speaking with perfect candour and composure of the absence of fraternal affection on Jem's part. Could it ever be that Celia might work on Lucy and rouse her, as a worm may be made to turn, into a frenzy of apprehension where her brother was concerned, of blind hostility towards him? Could it be that the elder sister might torment and torture the younger; hunt, harass, and madden her into enacting the wretched heroine of a French tragedy, in which the fumes of sulphur or the water of the Seine, with the ghastly Morgue in the background, play the prominent part?

Celia returned to the subject of Jem and his delinquencies towards his sisters. 'A nice time of it we two poor girls have, to be sure,' said Celia, 'shut up in a dreary old hole like this, not

even made decently comfortable for us. Hardly a creature, a man creature, I mean—not that we are particularly troubled with women creatures—to cross the threshold, unless a pottering naturalist and grinning philosopher, who is already a bachelor in his third lustre, particular about his flannel vest, and nervous about wet feet, like Fielding.'

'I am sure Mr. Fielding does not care for wet feet; and how do you know that he is particular about his vest?' asked the too literal Lucy.

'By intuition, my dear, by natural inference. Are you vexed because I have not given the first place to a high and mighty bishop-elect, wearing his stainless lawn by anticipation, in the person of our parson? Oh! but he cannot rule his own house according to his cánons. His cousin Tony is a fine sample of his parishioners.'

'I wonder Mr. North puts up with his cousin,' exclaimed Lucy, with a slightly heightened colour and a small pout of righteous indignation. Futile as it might be, it sufficiently cleared her of any active share in the lamentable association of the girls' names with that of a man of Tony North's character. Lucy's tone, to whomsoever heard it, limited her offence, where grave indiscretion was in question, to weak complicity and connivance. 'Mr. Anthony North must be such a trial to a clergyman,' went on Lucy; 'and it is so inconsiderate, so ungrateful of him.'

'We had better hear both sides before we decide,' said Celia, with lazy impartiality. 'I dare say Mr. Anthony North, as you call him, has something to say for his side. But he is not a splendid imperial humbug of an Anthony! He is a great deal better than that—an amusing, graceless, black sheep of a Tony; an obliging, convenient, fetch-and-carry Tony; an impudent wretch of a Tony! It is impossible to tell what we owe him,' finished Celia reflectively, with an affectation of conscientious thankfulness.

'I don't believe we owe him anything,' said Lucy hastily. 'It is all the other way. I wish we had never seen his face. I would give a good deal not to meet him so often. I don't like his coming here when Jem is out. I am sure Jem has been annoyed any time that he has returned and found Mr. Tony North here.

'And I am sure,' Celia took up the sentence with a mimicry of Lucy's tone, 'Jem ought to be glad that we have anything else than sheep, cattle, and crows to look at and to look at us. For if it had been otherwise we must have lost the power of human speech by this time—human speech as distinguished from the charming dialect of a Beaver. Jem is acquiring it; all his are becoming v's and his s's z's; and don't you notice how widely he opens his mouth, and how he works his jaws, though it is only for a growl?'

'Oh, do you think so, Celia?' asked Lucy, in real alarm.

'It would be such a pity for Jem to get to speak like the people in the village. I have not noticed it, because—well, because he speaks so little. Since he has no farm bailiff, he has to be out most of the day looking after Beaver and the other men with the cattle, sheep, and ponies, and he has to keep his farm-books and accounts in the evening.'

'Yes, and he has to smoke his pipe, and drink his glass of beer for the good of the house, in the "Furze Bush," with the other boors around,' said Celia sharply.

Lucy did not answer, unless to hang her head a little lower was an answer. She hastened to take up the conversation at the point where she had left it. 'Jem's mode of speech is just one of the few things remaining to distinguish him for the gentleman that he is. He often dresses as roughly as any of the moormen, or as one can fancy a settler in Australia. He won't always change his coat before dinner,' ended poor Lucy, quite plaintively.

'You forget that this stock-farmer, drover, and shepherd, hunts when he gets the chance, though he will not be at the small trouble and expense of having moor ponies trained for our use,' said Celia, without being at the pains to conceal her exasperation. 'But to return to our sheep, figuratively, since we have little else to return to *au pied de la lettre*; when shall we begin to "baa," do you think, Lucy?'

Even Lucy did not feel bound to answer this frivolous question; she began to arrange the contents of her work-basket with punctilious neatness, while Celia, resting on her elbows, looked on with a half-scornful, wholly derisive gleam in her hazel eyes.

'We are not so entirely without acquaintances as you choose to pretend,' protested Lucy. 'Mrs. Reynolds called on us and Mrs. Lacy talked of calling; at least so Mrs. Barnes told us when she came. You cannot deny that she was quite friendly and kind. She said she had girls of her own, and understood how strange everything and everybody must be to us; and she brought Mr. Barnes, such a nice old man, and evidently a gentleman, though he was actually plainer in his dress and speech than Jem. She pressed us to go to Barnes Clyffe, and it is our own fault,' ended Lucy in an aggrieved voice, though she was too entirely swayed by Celia to give free utterance to her vexation, 'that we have barely returned her call. When she came again we were out, and not to be found on this pathless moor. Now you will not call again at Barnes Clyffe, though I'm certain the calling rests with us, and is our duty. If you would go, it might be pleasant; we might coax Jem to go with us, and I cannot help thinking he might make friends with old Mr. Barnes.'

'You are a goose, Lucy,' said Celia in cold blood, without the slightest ill-humour. It was a peculiarity of Celia's that she rarely showed signs of temper, even when she was deliberately

provoking other people and setting them by the ears for her private entertainment. She prided herself on her command of temper, while it was one of her hardest, most baffling traits, sufficient to have disheartened her good angel. Perhaps she made up for it by the white heat of her wrath when it was excited.

'There are plain men and plain men. Mr. Barnes appropriates the privileges of age as well as of his position, which he has never forfeited. The position of a squire of good birth, good means, and good reputation—do you hear? of good reputation,' said Celia meaningly, while Lucy blenched at the emphatic repetition. 'It does not signify though your model parson has a crow to pluck with old Squire Barnes for not being a Churchman, as if the Reverend Miles, in his seven-and-twentieth year, could have anything to say worth hearing by Barnes of Barnes Clyffe in his seventieth or eightieth! But I have no faith in the ostentatious plainness of a Gregory Barnes. I believe I prefer the genuine shamefaced clownishness of our dear brother Jem. No, I am not going over to Barnes Clyffe again, to be patted on the back by Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. I won't have them hint to me to adopt the manners of their goody-goody hoydens of daughters who sing in the choir and teach in the Sunday school. We should have the Reverend Miles asking us to teach in the Sunday school next. Fancy one of us teaching in a Sunday school, and having the rustics reminding us, the first time we offended them, to let charity begin at home! It would need two or three generations of the strictest pharisaical respectability to qualify us to take the mote out of our brother's eye.'

Lucy was silent, a silence which only provoked Celia to fresh attacks. 'I declare, Lucy, I believe you would like nothing better than to act as another female curate to the Reverend Miles,' cried Celia, suddenly turning upon her sister with a taunting gibe, much as a cat would play with a mouse which it could despatch at any moment.

Lucy crimsoned and positively quivered as she shook her head, so that a suspicious person might have leaped to the conclusion that there had been something in Celia's random speech which had struck home. Possibly the Reverend Miles had been so enterprising, or so left to himself, as to invite Lucy to join his staff, and Lucy had ruefully declined.

'If my neighbours have not chosen to receive me with the consideration to which I am entitled, I will show them that I can do without them. I can be a law to myself and have a kingdom of my own. They may think it a fool's kingdom, but I'll let them see there is method in my madness, and plenty of fun, too, at their expense, if the solemn wiseacres can ever be brought to believe it; plenty of excitement, and all that any woman with a spark of spirit would care for.'

In her threats Celia had dropped Lucy out of the question.

She was treating her, to Lucy's face, as the cipher and nonentity which Celia held her sister to be, even when she made use of the younger girl's personality to serve the elder's purposes.

It must be admitted that Lucy was behaving very like a nonentity. She was simply looking bewildered and frightened, till Celia, slightly ashamed of herself, not for the treatment of Lucy, but for the comparative earnestness into which she had been betrayed, though it had a scoff and a sneer in it, returned hastily to the main thread of the conversation. 'I'm not such a poor creature as to be patronised by the Barneses, still less by that detestable doctor's widow, their relative. Tony North told me what she said of us. I'll pay Mrs. Reynolds back in her own coin, by giving her something to be amazed and horrified at, before we have done with each other.'

'I don't think Tony North ought to have told you what she said, or that you should have listened to him,' said Lucy, nerved by her vehement aversion to the gentleman to stand up once more against her elder sister and mentor.

Celia was nettled. She did not care for Lucy's code of honour, but her own queer code forbade her to act, as she was nevertheless quite well aware that she frequently acted, in a manner that was not in accordance with the standard of a lady. Celia was much more sensitive on a question affecting her ladyhood than on one which had to do with her womanhood; and even in the case which touched her it was conviction of having committed the error, and not its committal, that she feared. 'Nonsense!' she said impatiently; 'nobody save a hypocrite or a simpleton would air such scruples. Everybody likes to hear what her dear friend says of her. Not that Mrs. Reynolds is any friend of mine, dear or detestable, though I fancy I enjoyed our scamp Tony's delicious burlesque of her pious horror nearly as much as if she had been. He is a perfect windfall to keep us alive and prevent our degenerating, as our beloved brother is reverting, to the original type of the Endicotts. Imagine us in sun-bonnets, canvas aprons and clogs—youthful versions of Sally Beaver!'

'How can you talk such absurd stuff?' protested Lucy helplessly.

'Because I must do it or die. I have a notion that our excellent clergyman is in the same condition. He has to keep a private black sheep, a shifty *ci-devant* man about town, for a safety-valve from the results of his own excessive religious rectitude and unslumbering vigilance as a pattern parish priest. Don't you enjoy hearing Tony North's highly spiced society talk, and getting glimpses of his immeasurably wider experience?'

'No, I don't,' said Lucy, very sincerely, but a little deprecatingly. 'I suppose it is because I am not clever enough, since you like it. But it seems to me that he is always saying ill-natured things with a smile or a laugh that makes them pass

for pieces of wit. I don't think I care for such wit. I cannot help an impression, though it may be wrong and unjust, that he invents as he goes along.'

'Of course it is shockingly wrong and heinously unjust, said Celia, with a ringing laugh. 'But if he does invent, what a capital inventor he must be—off-hand, too! What a first-rate *raconteur*—not a wretched retailer of anecdotes at a drowsy dinner-table, or a long-winded, high-flown, unfortunate being of a novelist writing for bread-and-butter, but a man who lies, or romances—it is all the same—spontaneously, with grace, for the pleasure of the thing, as well as for the benefit of the listeners.'

Lucy sat dumb. There was nothing she could say to this panegyric.

Celia did not need encouragement to prolong it. 'Tony is an immense acquisition to the skirts of civilised society on the edge of a savage moor. He ought to receive the handsomest testimonial which can be provided for him—indeed he ought. I for one am willing to contribute my mite to the utmost of my small ability. And I have told you,' continued Celia, getting up yawning and stretching her long arms above her head in an attitude of easy abandonment that would have been utterly inadmissible out of a harvest-field or a cottage kitchen a dozen years before. 'I am inclined to argue he is a boon of no mean kind for the enlivenment of a sternly exemplary young clergyman, sticking fast in the dreary dead level, the pretentious gravity and solemn make-believe of his professional duties.'

'I don't in the least know what you mean,' said Lucy, who looked uselessly hot and ineffectually angry, like a ruffled pigeon, while she took refuge in the ignorance and perplexity which in themselves were perfectly genuine. 'But I am certain you are altogether wrong about Mr. North—the clergyman, I mean. He is not weary of his work. He is very much interested in it. Everybody says he is devoted to it. He is very good and kind, though he makes people stand in awe of him. I suppose he cannot help that,' finished Lucy, with a quick sigh.

'I suppose not,' said Celia. 'But does he make innocents stand in awe of him? He does not make me; but then I am not an innocent. In fact, it would be rather a shock to the world, and not at all likely to be successful, if either of us took up the *rôle*,' she added, shrugging her shoulders and speaking with her sarcastic emphasis.

'How can you be so horrid?' said Lucy, writhing. 'But that is not what we were speaking about. It strikes me Oxcleeve is very fortunate, after what I have heard of some of the former vicars, to have Mr. North for a clergyman.'

Celia strolled to the window as if she were tired of the subject, but turned round instantly. 'Speak of the gentleman whom the Reverend Miles believes he resembles least—though Tony North would be so prosaic as to assert that both of them

are black-coats—and he is sure to appear; there is the vicar opening the gate at this very moment. To what do we owe the honour of his visit? Is it possible that he observed me interchanging sympathetic glances and cocked-hat notes with his cousin Tony in church last Sunday, and has come to rebuke me? Or does he wish to hear your opinion on the Athanasian Creed and the more debatable clauses of the Thirty-nine Articles? Or are you to descant on the enormities of the former vicars? Rather an odd subject for a young lady and gentleman to discuss, but one need not wonder at anything.'

Lucy was not listening, she was hastily making straight the little litter of wools at her elbow, and looking about to see that the poor room was as presentable as she could make it. Then glancing at the door with an air of expectation which had something in it of the awe of which she had spoken, and something also of wistful admiration, a wave of delicate pink passed over her fair skin from the tip of her chin to the roots of her yellow hair.

CHAPTER X.

A CLERICAL VISITOR.

The Rev. Miles North was tall, fair, and pale, with closely cropped blonde hair and closely trimmed beard and moustache, the latter naturally tending to invisibility, from the lightness of the hair and the fairness of the skin underneath. In features, as in figure, he would have been a handsome young man, a little under thirty, had it not been for the same want of shade in his face which Queen Elizabeth enjoined in her portraits, and for a certain impassiveness of expression and rigidity of muscle, the effect of which was increased by his straight black coat and white tie, since he was a man rarely out of uniform. The defects in his appearance agreed with the definition which George Fielding gave of the clergyman's character: 'North would really be a fine fellow if he would not be continually putting force on himself, and if he would sometimes sink the parish priest in the man.'

But Miles North was bent on doing with all his might whatever his hand found to do in his office; and as the natural man demanded some indulgence, perhaps all the more urgently in proportion to the extent to which it was denied lawful ease and enjoyment, there was a necessity that he should put force on himself and wear his clerical armour night and day. In the same manner he had such a high ideal of the parish priest and such an ardent desire to walk up to his ideal, that he was inclined to undervalue the mere man and trample upon him. He had not come to the stage in his history, if he ever reached

it, when he would do justice to the man also, and would not be afraid to trust him as God's creature in a broader sense than the priest. He did not see that all men in the very manhood which Miles North was tempted to undervalue belonged to a divine priesthood, of which the human priesthood, though it might also be ordained of God, was but a figure.

Considering what Miles North was—a high-minded, unswervingly righteous man—it was of less consequence that he not only worked hard himself, but also called on others to work hard, requiring from them the same painful self-denial which he practised. He had been fairly acceptable to the rude, half-wild sheep of this moorland pasture-ground. The fact was, they had been accustomed to be ridden over and ruled despotically. But whatever they had lost, it was not a certain rough loyalty in the middle of their sometimes half-brutal and insolent independence. The population, making slow inroads, which it took centuries to accomplish, on the everlasting moor, had an inherent reverence for the strength and steadfastness which belonged to their bleak tors—unfailing landmarks, and to the deeply shadowed cavities of their cleeves which no succession of seasons served to fill up or diminish. Miles North's godliness, his concern for his Master's honour and his brethren's good, and the subserviency of his own interests and inclinations to what went before them, came like a revelation to the coarse, passionate people, and shone in their eyes as transcendent virtues when compared with what the natives had known of former clergymen—utterly careless, indifferent men, belonging to an ill-equipped, debased section of the sons of the Church. To say of any one of them that he was a renowned fox-hunter and a jolly boon companion was high praise; and when to these unclerical qualities had been added a little common honesty, a more or less reckless open-handedness with sundry precious grains of human kindness and tenderness of heart, the sum-total of priestly worth was reached.

Miles North never rode to hounds, which was a great mistake. He liked hunting, and might with a clear conscience have permitted it to himself sometimes. Besides, any individual feat he had accomplished or gallant performance he had joined in on the field which Dame Nature had tossed and tumbled to make fit ground for such achievements, might have served to recommend him to those of his parishioners who still stood aloof from him, and been a bond of union between him and such a young man as Jem Endicott. But no doubt the Rev. Miles showed his courage and daring in other ways, else he would have been regarded as a mere milksop, and treated to a small measure of respect in these regions. He would scour the moor in all directions in search of a lost mare and her foal, not to say a lost woman and her child. He would risk missing his way in solitudes that were practically as illimitable as the North

American prairies or the Australian bush, and being benighted and in danger of perishing of cold and hunger, before he could recover the clue to his whereabouts and return to the dwellings of men. As for the pixies and other denizens of the spirit-world, including the Yahoo shapes of men transformed to ponies, like the famous Benjie gair, said to occupy the far recesses of the moor—these his ghostly calling might have enabled him to encounter with composure and comparative impunity. But no power of writing sermons, or laying ghosts, or defying the devil would serve him in the same stead as a brave heart and a cool head, with the strong limbs of a trained swimmer, when the boat he had appointed to meet him failed him, and he breasted the Bar in flood in order to carry in time the last consolations of religion to a poor old woman sobbing out her dying breath in a hovel far from her kind.

It might be said that the Rev. Miles North had, on the whole, pursued a conquering path in his career as a born leader and guide of the people up to the present time. He had carried through with a tolerably high hand many of his plans for reforming the neglected condition into which the ancient church had fallen, and for rendering its service as reverent and orderly as in its palmiest days. He had established a school, and instituted classes and meetings, where a man as sincere but less resolute and indefatigable in his youth and vigour would have failed. He had not spared himself, and it may be said also he had not spared other people, yet he had managed to be generally liked as well as generally respected and feared.

Still without question such a pinnacle of attainment had its difficulties and perils. He was a good deal exercised by the demonstrative approbation of his work and of himself on the part of such a woman as Mrs. Reynolds, and the very fact of having accomplished so much as he had done piqued him with the mortifying consciousness that he could not do more; could not with the power of the Master's commission make fools wise, the cruel gentle, the churl liberal, the unclean clean.

But one of the two great thorns in Miles North's flesh at this date was his cousin, Tony North, who, by the vicar's free will, had found a refuge in the out-of-the-way Devonshire vicarage, and was there as a scourge to lash its master's pride, official and personal; since do as he might, strive as he would, every appeal which he made to that polished and callous specimen of humanity fell off as from a wall of adamant.

The other source of torment calculated to weaken the young clergyman's sense of satisfaction was, strange to say, his humble admirer, Lucy Endicott. He knew her sad history, he pitied her from the bottom of his heart, he would fain have protected her if he could. He did more, he apprehended with a subtle mixture of pleasure and pain the light in which he himself appeared to Lucy—as more like a god than a man, as the most

enviable of human beings. Did he not bear an honest name? Was not his calling—which he worthily fulfilled—the most honourable of all callings? Could it not be said truly of him that he had nothing to hide and nothing to fear; that his antecedents were as irreproachable as his present life was, and that he was a tower of strength against all future errors and failures? How different this man, happy in his ability and goodness, his absolute safety, his clear conscience, his creditable family traditions, from a poor girl like Lucy, who had inherited nothing save disgrace, who could not claim her right in any of the good which coming years might bring, whose prospects were altogether uncertain and rather hopeless, who had no faith in herself, who felt driven as an unfortunate fate and Celia might drive her!

Yet Lucy did not cry out against the inequality of human fortunes, or complain that the Judge of all the world had not acted fairly by her. She bore no grudge against Miles North for being possessed of all that she wanted. She accepted her lot so far meekly and resignedly, and contented herself with humbly admiring what she could not dream of rivalling.

Miles North saw the attitude of her mind from the first time that his eyes met those of Lucy in his parish church, and, without confessing it to himself, feared it for both of them. He felt that it held an indescribable temptation for him in what ought to have been his great superiority in years, character, position, experience—everything. He felt himself drawn by a powerful attraction; and he had not the slightest desire—on the contrary, he believed that he had an invincible objection—to be thus attracted. Of the two sisters Miles North disliked Celia; but he feared Lucy with her blue eyes, her yellow hair, her artless exaggerated regard for himself, with something like an instinctive dread.

It was, therefore, no slight effort for him to come and sit there opposite to her, to look round him at the poor bare sitting-room with hardly any of the conventional attributes of a gentleman's home, to glance at her and inadvertently reckon up the elements of sweetness and modesty which belonged to her if she had ever had a fair chance given her. It was a still greater trial to him to interfere in her private affairs, and seek to give her sound counsel and needful warning.

Miles North received no support in what he was going to do, either from Celia or Lucy. Celia sat and looked demurely at him, with her head a trifle on one side, as if she were taking stock of him, and preparing to make her own of him in the way of amusement. Lucy's admiration was too much mingled with awe to permit her to speak readily. She sat and trembled lest she should say or do anything amiss, lest she should displease him even when she was virtually worshipping him. And he could read her mind as if it were a book open in his hand, while the writing covered him with a not untender confusion and per-

turbation; he, the innately dignified clergyman, absorbed in his work—and such a work! The whole position made his task doubly hard and well-nigh insurmountable.

'You are fond of walking, you walk a good deal on the moor, don't you, Miss Endicott?' he remarked, with desperate vagueness, looking on the table before him and idly turning over the pages of a book which was lying there, instead of looking at Celia.

'Yes, where should we walk?' answered Celia, with her disturbing promptness and lurking satire. 'I hope there is no objection from the crows, or the flocks and herds. My language is patriarchal and Biblical—that is the effect of your company. By-the-bye, don't condemn me for the contents of the book you are handling. It is not mine, it is borrowed. I did not even borrow it; that was done by Lucy, just to keep up her French,' with a slight drawl.

Miles acted as if he had got leave to open the book. Indeed, he might not have waited for leave, for it was a defect, both in the man and the clergyman, that he had a tendency to assume the character of the spiritual director on all occasions. He turned to the fly-leaf of what proved a French novel, by Daudet. Above the title was scrawled 'Anthony North.'

The visitor's countenance could not be said to fall or even to change, but he closed the book hastily as if he had seen something disagreeable to him.

Before he could make any remark Lucy faintly deprecated what she imagined might be his wrath. 'I have hardly looked into it. If it is not a nice book, of course I shall not read it. If you do not approve of it, I shall not open it again. As Celia said, it was only for my French. I am afraid I shall forget it all, and that would be a pity, would it not, after the trouble and expense of acquiring it? We have no French newspaper here as we had at school; indeed, Jem gets only one English newspaper. Old lesson-books, however good, are dry by association, I suppose. Mr. North offered me a loan of this book, but I'll return it at once if you think I had better not keep it.' Lucy finished her confused jumble of apology and defence by metaphorically sinking at her vicar's feet with an instant offer of entire submission.

'You need not,' said Miles, in his somewhat slow formal way, though his blood was coursing rapidly in his veins, and his heart beating more in accordance with his years than with the discipline of his life. 'I know the book, it is Daudet's "Nabob," a great and famous book in its way. I should not think you could get much harm while you might get some good from that. I am not accustomed to overlook young ladies' studies'—here there was the ghost of a grave smile; 'however, I would advise you rather to sacrifice your French than to maintain it by an indiscriminate course of Daudet, or most other French novelists.

As for a French newspaper——' He was on the point of saying, 'I'll send you over the "Revue des Deux Mondes,"' when he bethought him of the absolute circumspection he had imposed upon himself. What might not even a newspaper lead to when the tinder was laid ready for the fire? He gave another turn to his sentence—'You may keep up French without the use of a newspaper. 'By-the-bye,' he added hurriedly, as if a new idea had struck him, 'I suspect my cousin has not a much better choice in newspapers than he has in books. I should be sorry for you to have recourse to his stock.'

'I thought it was the Pope who published a list of forbidden books,' said Celia, with the greatest apparent candour and desire for information. 'You do not mean to say that you, a Protestant, a Church of England clergyman, are going to take such a responsibility on your shoulders?'

'No, Miss Endicott, and if I did I don't suppose it would be of much consequence where you were concerned,' said Miles, nettled by her tone. 'I can imagine that you judge for yourself on that, as on most matters.'

'What a relief it must be to you!' said Celia, with lively conviction.

Lucy was waiting with her heart on her lips, so anxious was she to interpose to prevent Mr. North's being hurt, and to keep Celia from exhibiting some of those 'ways' of hers. She was never loth to display them when she had such a rabid antipathy to an opponent as she had where the Rev. Miles North was concerned. 'You were speaking about the moor, Mr. North,' broke in Lucy. 'Yes, we usually walk in that direction, like most of the people here who have time to walk. They are generally the few summer visitors. They seem to go out on the moor as a matter of course, for the lanes are so rough; not that walking on the moor is much better.' Poor Lucy spoke in a rueful tone, which betrayed plainly enough, without such an intention on her part, that hers was not the voice which decided even so small a matter in daily life as the direction of a walk. 'I confess I do not care for the moor very much; I get so tired, and I am afraid to go aside for losing myself. I strayed round the shoulder of a tor once, and I did not know where I was or what to do, for Celia did not come when I called. Then there are the cattle and the ponies; I do not mind the sheep, unless the dogs—the sheep-dogs I mean—they look so grim and fierce sometimes, as if they were so many wolves; and I must say I do mind the cattle and the ponies putting their heads over my shoulder before I know they are there, and bellowing and standing their ground, or neighing and scampering off when I glance back at them.'

Miles could not help giving way to a laugh, in spite of the burden on his mind, and his clerical decorum, which was doubly starched in the Endicotts' company. 'I dare say your sister

does not mind. Why should you mind?' he said reassuringly. 'If the animals do not take a bite of her or trample her under foot in play, why should they devour and demolish you, Miss Lucy?'

'Why indeed?' said Celia. 'Unless,' she added, knowing all the time that Lucy was quite sincere in her inherited childish dislikes and terrors, out of which she had neither been argued nor soothed, 'a pretty affectation of helplessness is an offence to them as it would certainly be to me. I could not stand it; if it came in my way I should give the would-be coward something to justify her panic.'

'But, Celia, I am sure you know that I cannot help feeling lonely and frightened,' said Lucy piteously, while Miles North looked straight before him and wished with all his heart that Celia could meet her match.

'I know,' replied Celia carelessly, 'that I am very glad you are sometimes provided with a protector, and that I am not always left alone to bear the full weight of your interesting tremors. Mr. North'—she faced round on him, speaking with the greatest coolness as she cut right to the heart of the awkward little lecture which he had come to deliver,—'I am not alluding to Jem, but to your cousin, Mr. Tony North. We are much obliged to him for acting as our escort occasionally, and he is willing to be our guide when we do not know our way, which is a fact, though it sounds odd, since this little corner of the world happens to be ours, not his. But we have been schoolgirls for the greater part of our lives'—Celia condescended to give a languid explanation—'schoolgirls never at home for the holidays. We have fallen out of acquaintance with Jem's barren acres, and he will not take the trouble of re-introducing us to them. No, I do not know what we should do without your cousin,' she said, with the calmest defiance. 'He is invaluable in many things, besides keeping off that stampede of raging bulls and mad horses to which Lucy was referring, preventing them from overwhelming two unprotected females.'

CHAPTER XI.

'WHO MEETS AND WALKS WITH TONY NORTH?'

'AH, that is just what I wish to speak about,' said Miles North quickly. He was wise in his generation, but he fell straightway into the trap which Celia had set for him.

'About what?' she inquired, with her hard laughing eyes, 'Jem's lack of gallantry towards his sisters, or Lucy's fear of the innocent kine, the blameless ponies, and the silly sheep? But I believe she puts the sheep out of count; it is the faithful

sheep-dogs she dreads. Oh, you must be a wizard or a prophet, Mr. North, to have foreseen our conversation.'

'No, I do not particularly wish to speak on the subjects you mention,' he replied to her mockery, with recovered composure. 'But as the clergyman of the parish, and as holding myself responsible for the presence here of a gentleman of whom you have spoken, I conceive I have some right—I am, indeed, in a measure bound, however painful it may be—to speak to you on the kind of man you are admitting to terms of intimacy with you and your sister.'

'What!' exclaimed Celia, 'a man expunged as well as a book! Does even the Pope take that upon him?'

He paid no heed to her. 'He is my cousin,' he said, 'and therefore I should know him. He is living under my roof, and for that reason, as you may easily guess, I should be unwilling to speak ill of him if I could help myself; but I tell you a more undesirable man for constant association with young ladies—I am afraid I must say a more unworthy man to be taken into their close friendship and to receive conspicuous marks of their favour—I cannot imagine.'

Lucy had begun by looking bewildered at the course the conversation was taking; now she sat speechless in her distress, her cheeks dyed crimson with mortification and shame.

But Celia only said in her indifferent tone, 'Standards differ.' She was neither touched by his earnestness nor affronted by the circumstance that he had found it necessary to give her such a warning. The only feeling she showed was a touch of haughtiness, and even that was balanced by the monkey-like pleasure of leading him into a labyrinth, and secretly laughing at him, while at the same time she forced him to speak out what he was reluctant to say. 'Does it not occur to you,' she said again, with an exasperating assumption of candid superiority, 'that though Lucy and I are girls we may be quite able to take care of ourselves; and that if Jem does not object, no third person, not even a clergyman, is entitled to find fault?'

'I don't know how you define the duties of a clergyman,' he answered coldly. 'I can only act according to my conscience. You are strangers here, at least you said a little while ago that you have come back comparative strangers. You have no'—He would have said 'mother,' but stammered and altered his sentence—'no older person to guide you and look out for rocks ahead in your path.'

'And do you mean to say you are going to do that for all the independent young women in your parish?' demanded Celia lightly. 'What an onerous office to assume, and how I pity them and you!'

For a second time he found it his best policy to give her no direct answer. 'Tony North is my kinsman,' he went on *gravely*. '*So long* as he stays in my house and goes about my

parish, so far stamped and privileged by our relationship and by his living with me, I consider myself accountable for the light in which he presents himself, and the abuse he may make of it, just as I might hold myself bound for any debts he contracted under false inferences which I had not contradicted. It is true I might have spoken to your brother instead of to you, but I thought you would prefer the latter alternative—that it might be less productive of unpleasantness and mischief.'

'Oh, Mr. North, we are so much obliged to you,' Lucy was able to say at last in her half-childish voice, when she was interrupted by her sister with the single word 'Lucy!' It was said so meaningly, with such an odd mixture in the tone of surprise, reproach, an unbecoming sense of high diversion, and a feeling of being entirely mistress of the situation, that Lucy gave a gasp and sank into silence before the appeal. Miles North was disagreeably reminded of what had given him the sharpest sting in the unsought communication which had sent him on his errand that morning. It was a piece of information he had not wished to hear, but, having heard, could not as a true man neglect. Mrs. Reynolds had volunteered to tell him what he ought to know. She had said that while both of the Endicott girls were for ever with his cousin, Mr. Tony, the grey dust-cloak and grey veil of one of them had been identified on the shoulders and head of a woman walking *tête-à-tête* with a man along the Ashford road after the twilight was so far gone that Mrs. Wayland, of the Wellhead, who had been at market in Ashford, and had waited to get a word with one of her boys, an apprentice in a shop there, had difficulty in finding her way across her own goose-green after she got near home, and had well-nigh fallen over the bank instead of walking straight to her house door. When she passed the couple on the road so late she would not have known the gentleman to be Mr. Tony North, the parson's cousin, had it not been for his build and walk, which were like those of none other in the place, unless it were the parson; and it was not he, else he would have hailed Mrs. Wayland and challenged her for being abroad at that hour. He had more need to challenge his gentleman cousin and the light-o'-head young miss from Blackhall, whose cloak and veil Mrs. Wayland could swear to, even in the failing light, because there were no other cloak and veil of the same shape and colour in the neighbourhood. For that matter, the natives of Oxcleeve were not wont to wear cloaks and veils on a May evening. And if either of the young misses at Barnes Clyffe, or any lady visitors at the Thorn did it, they thought more of themselves and were better looked after by their friends than to be seen a-walking and a-talking with a gentleman at such an hour. Mrs Wayland thanked her senses none of her lasses had ever tried such a trick. If so, Mrs. Wayland's master would have sent his daughter home in double quick time with a box on the

ear, though she was a lass, fit to make it tingle for the rest of the night, while he would have broken half the bones in her companion's body before he had stopped. It was going to be the old story over again with the two 'dandilie' misses up at Blackhall. It was ill taking out of the flesh what was bred in the bone, though Sally Beaver would stand up for the Endicotts because her man served them. She would have a rare job before she was done. It was a bad example for the parish. The parson's cousin, too! Why did Mr. North harbour an idle gentleman who was never about any good, when he was about aught under the sun; and why did he permit such ongoings under his very nose?

Miles North in his office of vicar did not listen to half the story, neither was it conveyed to him simply in Mrs. Wayland's rambling, but not ungraphic, way of telling it. Mrs. Reynolds added a stilted summing-up and a few mincing, yet blighting, innuendoes. But he caught this much of the facts, that one of the Miss Endicotts had been imprudently compromising herself by unseasonable strolls in which she had the attendance of his cousin. The Miss Endicott who had been so foolish had been recognised by her cloak and veil. It was Lucy Endicott, and not Celia, who sometimes wore a grey cloak and veil. Celia never wore either dust-cloaks to protect her frocks, or veils to shelter her complexion. Celia, even if she had been the defaulter, or if she was cognizant of all her sister did, could hardly know what it was he had heard, or how it was puzzling and paining him. Yet it was as if she divined the truth, by the help of the mocking devil in her. For the next moment she put herself in the favourite position which she had used in her conversation with Lucy that morning. Celia planted her elbows on the table which stood between her and the visitor, clasped her hands, rested her square white chin on them, and, looking him full in the face with a daring malicious glance, brought him to book instead of suffering that indignity at his hands.

'Now, Mr. North, what is all this solemn preamble and tremendous fuss about? You cannot really have come here to preach a sermon to Lucy and me on so insignificant a text as this. We happen to walk out on the moor, which it seems all the idle people in Oxcleeve are gregarious in doing. We come across a gentleman to whom we were first introduced in your company, and consent that he should let us see where this beacon or that pool, which, of course, we are dying to discover, is to be sought and found. If he should chance to have so much leisure on his hands, and to be in a sufficiently obliging mood, it may occur to him that it may be as well, in case of accidents, after having led us into the wilds, that he should lead us out again. And we may be of the same opinion. Now, the greatest scandalmonger in the most peddling little town in England could not make much out of that. You may be inclined to

take a good deal upon yourself—excuse me, but gentlemen, whether old or young, who wear long coats and white ties—there seems something demoralising in the dress—frequently do. Still, even you cannot be in the habit of calling to account every girl in your parish who exchanges a word, or a score of words, and walks a yard, or it may be a mile, with a gentleman of whom, though he is a relation of yours, and has eaten your bread, it is an open secret that you do not approve. There must be more behind, a great deal more, and one of us must be guilty. Let us be plain-spoken. Who walks alone with Tony North, not only in broad day but under the starlight? Who forces a most estimable and much-exercised young clergyman who has more to do than he knows how to accomplish, and ought to be infinitely better employed, to come over to Blackhall and ask her what she has got to say for herself? But, Mr. North, there are two of us here. The innocent ought not to be condemned with the guilty. Who is it that meets and walks with Tony North at unhallowed hours?'

Miles North was dumb before the audacious challenge; but he felt it was a relief, though unacknowledged and hardly realised at the time, that Lucy did not go into hysterics or faint on the spot. She simply sat as if spell-bound, open-eyed, open-mouthed, staring like a fascinated bird at Celia, who looked round triumphantly.

But an end was suddenly put to the triumph, and to the clergyman's call. Jem's foot was heard entering the house. Miles North got up to greet the master of the house, and, after a few words of baldish ordinary conversation, elected to take his leave. He did not feel equal to prolonging his visit without appealing to Jem, and to do that, though he had spoken of it as a possible contingency, would be to constitute himself the instrument of forcing matters to a climax, and bringing about a scene of family exposure, wrangling, and recrimination—the very result which most men dread above all things. Miles North was not unlike his kind. He could have braved the odium which such a deed would involve in the course of his duty, but he did not see himself justified in taking the obnoxious step on the instant, or as compelled in obligation of his office to put his foot farther than he had already put it. He delayed the evil day, trying to fortify himself, not very successfully, with the mental assurance that at least he had warned the Miss Endicotts of what was known and thought of their escapades. Forewarned might be forearmed with them, as with a few—a very few—indiscreet persons hurrying on the road to discomfiture, if not destruction.

When Miles North was gone and Jem had taken the gun for shooting wild pigeons, which he had come to fetch, and gone on his errand of slaughter, a dead silence prevailed for several minutes between the sisters—one of whom had been as cruelly agitated

and unfit to hold up her head when Miles North shook hands with her as the other was perfectly unembarrassed and able to look in his grave, disapproving eyes and still wear her disdainful smile.

At last Lucy broke out in woeful protest. 'Oh! how could you be so unkind, so unjust, Celia?'

'Why, what did I do or say?' asked Celia, the picture of injured innocence, except that there was a relentless fiend of lurking derisive laughter in her flashing dark eyes and on her curling red lips. 'I told him the innocent should not be condemned with the guilty—was not that quite right? I asked him who it was that met and walked with Tony North at unseasonable hours—was that not perfectly fair and above-board? He might have said more. You might have spoken out. I am sure it was not I who gagged either or both of you. Oh! you are the goosiest goose, Lucy. But I am rather tired of your goosiness at this moment. Perhaps bringing goosiness to Oxcleeve is like carrying coals to Newcastle. Certainly I have had enough of it for one morning. I am going out on the moor, since nothing better offers, to see if any pony will poke fun at me, or any ox talk logic for my benefit. Sally Beaver will give me my lunch; you need not expect me back before dinner.'

Celia went, and Lucy could find nothing better to do than push aside all her little paraphernalia of work, stretch her arms across the table, lay her bowed head on them till her face was hidden—a very different attitude from that which was in favour with Celia—and take that true woman's indulgence—a good, useless, exhausting cry.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY JONES AT HOME.

THE Court was made habitable, the first time for a term of years. George Fielding flattered himself, when he took a cursory look over it before consigning it to the new tenant, that it presented a happy union of the venerable in its paved pathway and its undulating thatched roof, its short wide porch, in which nobody was ever likely to sit, though a couple of stone seats were provided for the accommodation of the public, and its panelled rooms; and of the modern in its fresh whitewash and paint, glitteringly clean, its scrupulously whole window-panes in the lattices, and its garden in such order as even Gentleman Granaway, lover as he was of old-fashioned flowers, had not been able to keep it. The tumble-down offices were bolstered up, cleared out, refitted, and, after a long interregnum, made capable of being put to some rational use.

Lady Jones took possession very quickly. She came with her couple of not very young and not very aggressive maid-servants, her pony carriage and pair of dun ponies—a working match, trustworthy and serviceable, without presenting anything particularly dainty or dashing in horseflesh. A stable-boy from the 'Furze Bush' was permitted by the neighbourly good-nature of Tom Carew to look after them for 'a consideration'—the perquisite of the boy. The whole establishment of the widow of a late governor of a big slice of Australia, about as extensive as the countries of Great Britain, France, and Germany thrown together, was quartered in its exceedingly modest quarters almost before the natives were aware that the new people were there. That rare quality, modesty, seemed to be a distinguishing feature of the last product of the colonies. Lady Jones's great aim, as far as George Fielding could see, and he observed her with some interest from the beginning, was to do everything as unobtrusively and unassumingly as possible. If she made a mistake in wishing to shun public attention, it was in being almost too quiet and simple in her tastes, and too sparing in her demands. It was a little surprising to think of a lady who had dwelt in a Government House installing herself in a clumsy, overgrown, hoary cottage, which was all that the Court could pretend to be, without the slightest right, even in its reformed character, to tack on the word *ornée* as a fit adjunct to its name. In addition she furnished the ancient house almost in keeping, and that not strictly in an æsthetic taste, with what might have been the habits of its former occupants. It was all very well to have the rooms lined with native pine-wood innocent of paint, though subjected to varnish, and the stone floor covered with thick matting, but where was the reason for rude clumsy chairs, no better than those at Blackhall? In a similar line of argument, wooden shelves for mantelpieces and wooden cupboards might be in harmony, but why crown and fill them with ordinary American timepieces and common Ashford earthenware? It remained without saying that Australia was not like India, which since the days of Solomon has furnished its governors, and, as a matter of course, their widows, with spoils of ivory and ebony, wrought gold and silver, and the skins of slain tigers, together with living apes, to embellish and render cheerful Western homes. But not a single opossum skin, not a plume of dried grass, not a stuffed bird or an empaled moth, did Lady Jones bring with her to show, like the palm-branch and the cockle-shells of the pilgrim of old, the strange lands where she had been. She seemed to have carried away nothing of her former treasures, save the portrait of the departed governor, and that she had duly hung up in one of the sitting-rooms. These were of so nearly the same small square size, with so slight a difference in their utilitarian belongings that, as Mrs. Reynolds complained, it gave a visitor unnecessary

trouble to decide which was the dining-room and which the drawing-room. Dear Lady Jones was so peculiar in some of her ways. It was a pity that she did not take a hint from the excellent arrangements in the house across the Green, with regard to which its owner could reflect confidently that nobody in his senses was in danger of mistaking the proper habitat of mahogany and Russian leather, a sideboard, a dining-table, and the late Dr. Reynolds's easy chair, for that other and more elegant habitat which was always kept in apple-pie order for visitors, the chosen home of rosewood and bamboo, china and ladies' work.

The portrait of the late Sir Benjamin Jones, which could not be called a trophy of high art, though it seemed to supply a forcible likeness, represented a hale, bluff, elderly man in full dress with a massive gold chain and an equally massive gold ring, which looked as if they had come from the diggings. But these possible insignia of office were the only vulgar things, whatever else might be healthily homely and prosaic in the painted version of the defunct governor.

Lady Jones's reserve did not extend to any disinclination to discuss the picture or its original. 'Yes,' she said directly, in answer to a hesitating suggestion, 'he was a great deal older than I. He was an honest man and a kind man. Everybody who had anything to do with him acknowledged his worth. It was an honour to be connected with him,' she ended, with sensitive pride.

'Ah! we poor widows can feel for each other's losses,' said Mrs. Reynolds, bubbling over with demonstrative sympathy, in return for which she got the somewhat discomfiting answer, delivered with a faint smile that played like a moonbeam over the pale unfurrowed face, set in its white frame:

'No, Mrs. Reynolds, I do not believe that either you or any other widow—almost, can understand, happily for yourselves, what Sir Benjamin was to me.'

'I dare say he married her when she had not a penny,' Mrs. Reynolds reflected shrewdly, 'and left her every farthing of his money. All very well, though excessively matter-of-fact and a trifle mercenary. Who heard the baulked heir's story? Still, I do not see any occasion for her to go about in these melancholy black woollen frocks and hideous caps because of a man who might have been her father, and had a short neck and a bullet head like those in that coarse picture.'

With regard to the use of the word 'frocks' Mrs. Reynolds, in her lumbering friskiness, was apt to catch up from her nieces at Barnes Clyffe the latest tricks of speech, the newest old words for common things, and to use them on her own behalf, not exactly with the rejuvenescent effect she intended to produce. It may be seen that Mrs. Reynolds was a little puzzled by her recent acquisition in the shape of a friend, and not always or

altogether satisfied with her. But the doctor's widow could not afford to drop Lady Jones, however eccentric and obstinate her ladyship might prove. Indeed, Mrs. Reynolds never for a moment dreamt of such an extreme measure, which could be adopted without much scruple in the case of girls like the Endicotts, unprovided for, friendless—dogs with bad names fit to hang them. But considerable licence must be allowed to the widow of a Sir Benjamin—even though his was but a colonial knighthood—seeing that his fortune was behind her. Unfortunately, she neither looked nor did justice to the part she might have played; but that did not interfere with the fact that the part was undeniably hers to deal with as she pleased.

If Lady Jones had been, according to Mrs. Reynolds's statement to George Fielding, a living example of activity and industry under difficulties, while she was the inmate of a London boarding-house, the principal quality she showed at Oxcleeve was a feverish restlessness. Yet, purposeless as her restlessness looked to outsiders, she was too much distracted by it to pay much heed to her domestic surroundings. She was too engrossed by the busy idleness in which, however, she neither worked, nor read, nor paid visits, to attend to inanimate objects which take the tone from the person they surround. What were simplest, what answered her few requirements best, without asking in return for anything save the most cursory notice, appeared to suit her. Her chief employment, which included, as far as could be judged, her greatest pleasure, was to be abroad continually, in all states of the weather, driving her ponies along every cart-track she could make to serve her, in all directions over the moor. She was a good driver, and could manage for herself. She only wanted the boy from the 'Furze Bush' to act as the groom of her little stable. She had no fear of poor Lucy Endicott's bugbears, the droves of cattle and ponies to be encountered everywhere. She was destitute of any apprehension with regard to the more reasonable and formidable objections that could be urged as to the loneliness of these incessant expeditions, and the possibility of accident during their occurrence. It seemed as if she could not go far enough and stay away long enough; and her servants might have told that she often came home so tired out with her exertions that it was all she could do to creep to bed. It might have been for her health's sake that she made the efforts; but if it were so, it was the same with them as with her shy passion for escaping observation—she overdid the business. No tinge of colour awoke in her blanched face, her gait did not grow firmer or more elastic. The lack of physical benefit was, perhaps, not to be wondered at, if anybody could have seen what Lady Jones did when she supposed herself unseen, and reckoned on the consequences which were likely to follow in the instance of a woman whose shaken, overwrought physique had developed premature infirmity. She would alight,

as she could do without assistance, and fasten her ponies securely to some one of the straggling weather-beaten trees, tree-stumps, or bushes, breaking the monotony of furze and heather, bracken, and bare rock in the wildest bits of the moor. She would struggle on, as if with an irresistible longing to overleap the limits imposed upon her by these feeble wavering feet of hers, in a vain effort to quit the cart-road and make her way, as the cattle and sheep made theirs, over the broken stony ground, across a watercourse, through the tangle of matted and prickly undergrowth. She would sink down at last foiled, helpless, and trembling in every limb within a hundred paces of the sundew or the grass of Parnassus, or the particular fern the haunts of which she had guessed and found. Only love of the lone fresh nature stretched out before her—love stronger than weakness, strong almost as death—could have prompted the unequal, hopeless strife. She owned to the tender passion in this case without any attempt at denial or palliation. 'There is nothing like the moor,' she said, speaking with all the strength of her heart in answer to Mrs. Reynolds's wondering, complacent remonstrance. 'Not even the Australian bush, though that too was not bad in its way. If I could but walk as I once could, from Ash Bottom to Red Cap—you see I know all the names. But at least I can smell the furze and the heather. Yesterday I met a company of moormen and saw no end of grey sheep-dogs. The day before, I heard the bark of a young fox and the cry of a hawk. Now, do look at the draw-well on the Green, just beyond the Court gate, where it has been for centuries, I dare say. Yonder is Zecchy Sampson, I think you call him, in his smock-frock, which he must have got on his marriage, standing still to chat with every drawer of water. He has put down his bundle of sticks to ease his stooping shoulders and to speak with greater freedom to an old woman, his contemporary. She has come out in her sun-bonnet, and she has her petticoats tucked up and spread out behind her, like a fan or a bird's tail, just as her grandmother may have worn them. I know what they will be saying—

'"Tom Carew's cow ha' calved."

'"What ha' they done wi' un?"

'"Gi'ed calf to Cole, t' Ashford butcher, zewer."

'"A vox leapt over the comb o' the hedge and caught a geuse of Missus Tristrail's. Her is main vexed."

'"Nay, you doan't zay zo!"

'"Yes, I does, and we never knowed it till Zunday."

'"What volk ha' come to Widdy Rissel's?"

'"A power of volk, but I bean't acquaint with their names."'

'Well, now,' cried Mrs. Reynolds, who served as the audience to the small performance, 'what an ear and a memory you must have to pick up and retain such gibberish!'

'Ah! you do not know what all these sights, sounds, and

scents are to me, who have not seen or heard or smelt anything like them for many a day,' cried Lady Jones, in one of her bursts of frankness which doubtless served as a safety-valve to preserve intact her habitual reserve. 'The very ducks and geese are like old friends,' she went on, carried away by her subject. 'Did you ever observe their ways, how the ducks nod their heads and wag their tails, how fond the geese are of forming into a string, always with a leader, always with two walking sideways, and one with her head awry?' In her voice there was a palpitating youthfulness, contrasting strangely with something of the resigned sadness of age in her air. She was half laughing, half crying, though it was only for a moment.

'Dear me!' exclaimed Mrs. Reynolds, with one of her own girlish giggles. 'I always knew the moor was nice enough in summer, though I must say it is a savage place in winter, and Oxcleeve is believed to be one of the healthiest spots in Great Britain. That is why my dear husband brought me here. He always said so, he proved it by statistics, which, unfortunately, I cannot remember. But I cannot share your enthusiasm for uncouth rustics and their dialect, and I must say that you are easily amused when ducks and geese divert you. What a memory you have!'

'Yes, I have a good memory,' said Lady Jones, subsiding on the instant into her normal quietness; 'sometimes I could wish it were not so good;' and she gave the faintest shiver as she spoke.

'One of your favourite geese going over your grave,' suggested Mrs. Reynolds with remarkable sprightliness, and then continued the conversation in a tone of exaggerated wisdom. 'Forgetfulness will come soon enough. I know exactly what you mean. I often wish that I could get all the dismal details of poor Dr. Reynolds's last illness out of my head; but we can safely trust them to fade away in the course of years. In the meantime I try to occupy my mind, and am never at a loss, what with my books and my work, my small charities, the church, my friends; though I confess I cannot amuse myself quite so easily as you do. I cannot find any pleasure in watching old Zecchy Sampson gaping and mumbling in his dirty smock-frock, and old Lovey Veale, who looks what I call perfectly indecent with her petticoats tucked up like a little girl's and her old ankles exposed.'

'Lovey! Lovey Veale!' cried Lady Jones.

'Yes, it is a queer name,' said Mrs. Reynolds, with a nod to her companion, who stared not one whit less intently at the venerable couple before her because of the stricture she had heard on her peculiar tastes. Then she pulled herself together and replied to an earlier remark of her visitor's: 'I don't think you know what I mean, if you will pardon me for saying so. Why should *you know?* Our experiences must have been very

different. I like to recall Sir Benjamin; "Ben Jones," as his old friends called him at all times, even to the last. He did not suffer much, and he bore it like a man—like a Christian, I should say. There was nothing to shrink from in an end like his,' she said steadfastly, as if she coveted such an end.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY JONES EMBARKS ON A SINGULAR STATEMENT TO MRS. REYNOLDS, AND THEN SHOWS HERSELF A GOSSIP OF THE FIRST WATER.

'Oh, my dear creature, do not let us dwell on such doleful topics,' Mrs. Reynolds protested; 'you are far too much alone—you are, really. It is not good for you; you must go out—not driving in that random, harum-scarum fashion, forgive me, over the moor, but to see the friends who will be charmed to make your acquaintance whenever they know you are ready for them, and at home to receive them. I would rather drive with you myself,' suggested Mrs. Reynolds graciously, 'though the moor roads shake one so, in a little carriage like yours—against which I warned you. I am certain it was not a wise investment,' she ended reproachfully.

'I had the springs and the axles made of extra strength; and Gooseberry and Peascod are unexceptionable in sure-footedness, whatever may be said of their symmetry,' declared Lady Jones in self-defence.

'But what of your own bones?' inquired Mrs. Reynolds facetiously. 'I suppose you did not get those made to order?'

'No,' said her ladyship disconsolately; 'certainly they had not been made to last—not as regards the power of walking, for they have not served out my time.'

'Oh, I did not mean that,' cried Mrs. Reynolds, shocked at the interpretation put on her words. 'You could not think that I should be so rude as to allude to your deficient walking—not at all objectionable to look at, I assure you—nothing of a limp. Yet even in reference to a limp, if you remember, there was a report just after I was married, that it was coming into fashion in order that we might all keep a deservedly popular royal lady in countenance, in the same manner that the Grecian bend had been taken up. But I cannot say I ever favoured either eccentricity;' and the matron squared her broad shoulders and reared her large figure majestically. 'Still, in a case of necessity like yours, if you accommodated yourself to circumstances, and made the best of them, the defect might look like the swimming motion which was once in the highest favour in the best circles. I am quite in earnest, dear Lady Jones.'

'And will you give me lessons?' cried Lady Jones, with an

uncontrollable laugh, in which there lurked more simple regret than either mirth or bitterness. 'Swimming! I wish I could swim—call it creeping, rather. But I should be reasonable—it is no great penalty to pay, if that were all.'

'I cannot see that there is much good to be got in shaking yourself to pieces, and wearing out these poor ponies of yours just to reach some stupid out-of-the-way bit of the moor,' said Mrs. Reynolds discontentedly.

'I am sorry to say I don't get to the out-of-the-way bits,' said Lady Jones, shaking her head. 'I have not been within miles and miles of the Packman's Well, or Red Windows.'

'Packman's Well! Red Windows!' exclaimed Mrs. Reynolds. 'I dare say not. Why, it takes the best pedestrians in the country to reach them, and the first is as hard to find as ever Rosamond's Bower could have been. I have heard Dr. Reynolds say he only once hit upon it by chance, and naturally, I suppose, there was not a drop of water to be seen. The last time I was at Barnes Clyffe, my niece, Nettie Barnes, a young creature of sixteen, the most active girl and the greatest trouble to keep her sitting still I ever saw, was teasing her father to let her go up to Red Windows. He told her "No, Nettie, not yet. You must wait till you are woman grown if you are ever to make out that tough bit of climbing." You could never in your strongest days have reached Red Windows, while you can still walk, with a little help, across the Green; and yet you have never been to see me! Actually you have not once crossed my threshold and returned a single call of mine, though I have been to see you nearly every day. You think of it!' exclaimed Mrs. Reynolds, with elephantine playfulness, tapping Lady Jones on the arm.

It was difficult for Lady Jones to excuse herself. Mrs. Reynolds had been assiduous in her friendly attentions; Lady Jones had been remiss in the ordinary form of acknowledgment. She tried to rest her apology on her special bodily weakness. 'I know you have been good to me,' she said hesitatingly, 'and you were the first to speak to me of the moor and Oxcleeve after I had not seen or heard of them, oh, for so many years! But you are aware that I cannot get about like other people.'

'My dear Lady Jones, even if you could not walk across the Green, and I believe you could, with a little help, as I said—my maid Jane tells me she saw you from the Drover's Road mount more than a hundred yards in the direction of the Lady's Gown, the waterfall on Black Tor—but granting that you could not traverse the Green on foot, there is surely nothing to hinder you from driving your ponies to my gate instead of your own, and alighting and entering the one house as you enter the other? Why are you so painfully shy? It is growing upon you. I *can tell that* you are a great deal worse in this

respect than when I met you in town. We must get hold of you and shake it out of you,' said Mrs. Reynolds, as if Lady Jones were a naughty little girl, who was to be taught better behaviour.

It was plain that the woman thus assailed must not only assert herself, she must speak out. 'Excuse me, I do not mean to go and see you,' she said in a low tone, but quite firmly. 'As for your kindly coming to see me, of your own accord, that seems to me a different thing from my going to see you; though, perhaps, I ought to have stopped you till I had explained myself.'

Mrs. Reynolds sat staring goggle-eyed, with her mouth drawn in to a mere crevice in her face. She did not so much as giggle. Was it possible that Lady Jones could take it upon her to think that, because she was the widow of a colonial governor with a pinchbeck title, she was entitled to decline visiting on equal terms the widow of an eminent physician, the daughter of a minor canon of a venerable cathedral?

Fortunately, Lady Jones explained herself a little farther before Mrs. Reynolds could utter her amazement and indignation. 'You encountered me in a boarding-house in London,' said the supposed bloated aristocrat, with the utmost mildness, though still with decision. 'A slight introduction sufficed there. If you will think of it, you know almost nothing of me.'

Mrs. Reynolds recovered from her temporary consternation, and found breath and coolness to say, though it was only in broken protests, 'But you are the widow of Sir Benjamin Jones. They knew you at the bank—you don't mean to deny that?'

'No,' said Lady Jones, with a wintry smile. 'I don't deny that I am my late husband's widow, and that I have an account at the bank with which he dealt. But you know nothing whatever of my previous history, and, what is more, I do not intend to tell either you or anybody else at Oxcleeve.'

There was another short silence, during which Mrs. Reynolds's shrewd side came into play. Lady Jones was an odd woman in every respect—Mrs. Reynolds had found out that before now. It was perfectly true that in such intercourse as had already passed between the ladies, the elder, and much the longer resident at Oxcleeve, had not been able, by exerting the utmost ingenuity, to worm out anything with regard to her ladyship's antecedents; above all, as to how and when she had known the moor and Oxcleeve in former days. The moor was a wide word, and she might have approached it from the other side, which was far enough away; but then she had been evidently familiar with Oxcleeve. Her present announcement might be merely that of an eccentric woman, with some love of mischief where one would have least expected to find it, who traded on the shortness of her acquaintance with Mrs.

Reynolds to mystify her. Lady Jones might have other motives, bred of mortification caused by her infirmity, of social laziness and self-will, for declining the regular visiting with her neighbours, which she had from the first deprecated. Mrs. Reynolds, with all her follies and affectations, had enough sagacity to divine thus far, and to judge also that the lady's declaration was not at all like that of an ordinary impostor or adventuress, who would have been only too eager to secure all the advantages of the situation, and to conceal the truth till it was past concealment.

Mrs. Reynolds summoned up all her dignity to meet the emergency. 'Lady Jones,' she said with some spirit, 'if I have shown myself satisfied with what I know of you, I do not think you need have troubled yourself to assure me that you will not answer questions which I have not presumed to put. I am sensible of what I owe to myself as well as to you. I am not aware that I have expressed any impertinent curiosity as to your past history.'

The rebuke was just. Lady Jones admitted it by hanging her silvered head. 'No,' she said, 'you have been friendly, you have taken me on trust hitherto. But I thought you might reasonably expect that I should in time allude to my connections and my youth, and tell, for instance, how I came to be nearly utterly friendless as I am. That in itself sounds alarming,' she said again, with the faint, sad smile which was somehow quite apart from her occasional almost youthful laughter. 'There are other circumstances in my life, which, judged by a different standard from mine, you might not approve of—you might thoroughly condemn. I think I am right in not wishing you to be compromised without knowing it by having me at your house, where I might encounter others besides yourself—the friends you speak of, whom you seem to value highly. That is one among many reasons why I decline all visiting on my own account, unless'—she hesitated again, perhaps because her voice began to tremble a little—'for the sake of business which must be attended to—at Blackhall it may be, if my landlord and his family will not come and see me here.'

'Well, Lady Jones, you have made a singular exception,' said Mrs. Reynolds drily. 'If Jem Endicott has not the civility to call on his tenant, I do not think you need run after him. You had better let Mr. Fielding know what you wish. As for Endicott's foolish sisters, they are a couple of fast, indiscreet girls, though the youngest looks so demure and meek, as if she would be frightened at her own shadow; but, for all I know, that is the worst style of flirt, worse than the pert and saucy kind, and I believe it is likely to turn out so here. They go nowhere. Certainly you are safe from the danger of encountering other company at Blackhall,' said Mrs. Reynolds, with a sneer, 'and you may be under no fear of compromising

the Miss Endicotts—silly, giddy things both, and an impertinent minx one of them.'

'Is not that the very reason why I should go?' said Lady Jones coldly, but with a repressed fire in her coldness. 'If no other person goes near them, then they may be the better of me—a woman like themselves; an older woman, but not so much older as to be beyond sympathising with them; a stranger in the place, who has nothing to lose, while she is sensible of drawbacks in her own circumstances which might prevent her also from being welcome everywhere.'

'I'd take care of being quixotic,' Mrs. Reynolds hastily implored her companion, as if she were warning her against something which was at once extremely improper and decidedly dangerous. 'It never answers; it's simply an encouragement to wrong-doers. But so far as you yourself are concerned, I am persuaded that you are too scrupulous.' Mrs. Reynolds took up the old argument where she had left it off, acting in her own interest. She was stoutly determined to hold to her course, and not to be baulked of the advantages—dwindling as they might be before her eyes—which might accrue to her from continuing her acquaintance with the late Australian governor's widow. Mrs. Reynolds could be stubborn with the best at that game; besides, she had already gone too far to retreat with flying colours. She had boasted of her friend Lady Jones, implying the influence she was likely to exert over her ladyship for the good of the community, till the inhabitants of the half-dozen scattered country-houses on the verge of the moor had pricked their ears.

At the same time Mrs. Reynolds secretly registered a resolution to be more careful for her friends than for herself. She would hold back the lavish introductions which she had pressed on the mistress of the Court, to all the best families within visiting distance. Above all, Mrs. Reynolds would be careful to keep her sister Amelia, Mrs. Barnes, at a distance from a doubtful *protégée*, even though she was a rich woman and the widow of an Australian governor. Mrs. Reynolds owed it as a duty to the dear girls at Barnes Clyffe—a duty which she had frequently quoted in reference to bringing Nettie and Milly Barnes in contact with those horrid Endicott girls, whom Amelia and Greg Barnes had actually proposed to take up. They were so injudicious, and incapable of drawing deductions and reckoning up the consequences when the broken are not kept from the whole.

'Then, Mrs. Reynolds,' said Lady Jones, 'if you will not consent to drop me, you must accept the responsibility, as you are now aware of the terms on which we stand, and the sole conditions on which our acquaintance can continue. I visit nowhere unless on business or where my presence may be a decided gain. Of course, I am not so foolish as to imagine it

would be so to you, while I am happy to receive you if you are good enough to come here after what I have said.' The speaker looked half weary, half pleased, while she spoke, for it is a small satisfaction to most of us to find that our personal recommendations are such as to render our temporary associates reluctant to give us up under whatever pretence. Besides, this woman was terribly lonely in a place which she had once known well.

'There you are too modest,' Mrs. Reynolds was saying,

With nods and becks and wreathed smiles,

'as if I should not regard it as a great favour to have you stepping in and letting us enjoy one of our nice cosy chats, when I am sitting by myself, and feeling what I call decidedly dozy. I could even humour you, and abstain from naming you when any of my friends were there,' suggested the lady, feeling her way; then, quick to interpret a drawing together of Lady Jones's eyebrows, with a suspicious gleam from the bright eyes beneath them, she hastened to add, 'No, I suppose a wilful woman must have her way to begin with, but you are standing in your own light, dear Lady Jones, indeed you are. However, we'll have another talk about it by-and-by, since I am to be allowed to come here.' Mrs. Reynolds simpered and tittered, shook hands, and bowed herself out.

Lady Jones felt considerable relief and gratitude at having surmounted an ordeal without alienating the only friend, such as she was, whom the new-comer could call hers, in the county. In addition, she had a dash of frank, colonial hospitality—she accompanied Mrs. Reynolds into the porch, and stood with her for a minute or two between the unoccupied stone seats, looking down the straight flagged pathway through the rose bushes and tiger-lilies, and the overarching ash trees which framed a vignette of one of the many village greens. At this instant the vignette was made up principally of a family group passing along.

'Why, there are the very Endicotts we were speaking of,' cried Mrs. Reynolds. 'And there is a sight for you which may rank among the wonders of the world: one of the boarding-school misses has Mr. Jem's arm!'

It was Celia, who, when Lucy and she had stumbled on their brother issuing from the 'Furze Bush,' had been seized with the mischievous freak—she was still but a girl—of publicly taking the arm which he had no mind to give. He could not shake her off, but he walked with his hands thrust far down in his pockets, rendering her performance as difficult, and his reception of it as ungracious, as possible.

But Mrs. Reynolds could not find herself sufficiently disengaged to study the group, for Lady Jones was clutching her friend's arm to steady herself, and appealing to her as if it were

a matter of life and death importance. 'Tell me quick, which is Celia and which is Lucy? Is that big fellow Jem?'

'Yes, that hulking youth is your landlord. People say he is like his father, who was a monster. The yellow-haired girl is Lucy—I believe the picture of her mother, which is a great pity in the circumstances, for there is sad room to fear, as I told the vicar the other day, that the likeness will not end there.'

'You did!' said Lady Jones, looking startled and shaken by the sudden appearance of persons whose characters and conduct she had heard discussed till she had arrived at taking a keen interest in them apart from the fact that they were her landlord and his sisters. 'You did? How dared you?'

'What should hinder me?' inquired Mrs. Reynolds in surprise; 'somebody had to speak, since Mr. North—though he is a pattern clergyman—is a man, and a young man. He might be so easily talked over and deceived. There was actually a rumour of his asking Lucy Endicott to join the choir in which my niece Milly Barnes sometimes sings. Could you imagine anything more awkward and undesirable? He might ask her to take a class in the Sunday school; she might even make her way into the Mothers' Meeting and the Clothing Club, which, as there is no lady at the vicarage, have been managed hitherto by myself and my sister, with a little assistance from Mrs. Lacy. It would be an intolerable intrusion, but the girl Celia Endicott—the broad-shouldered, brown-haired girl, holding her brother's arm, forsooth! as if she needed support, or as if the pair were so fond of each other—has impertinence enough for anything if the fancy only took her.'

'May she not even take her brother's arm?' asked Lady Jones, in a sharp, bewildered tone. Then she excused herself from standing there longer in the hot sun, accepted Mrs. Reynolds's leave-taking and went into the house, shutting the strong oak door, which generally stood open, behind her.

'She is the queerest woman I ever came across,' reflected Mrs. Reynolds, taking her way across the Green, picking her way among the geese and shaking her sunshade at an old gander which stretched out his neck and hissed at her. 'I wonder if she is all right? Sir Benjamin could not have been a retired convict, now, could he? No, even in Australia they would not have made such a man a governor. Can she be wrong here?' and she bent her brows as an indication to herself that it was her forehead she was thinking of. 'However, if there was anything wrong the lawyers would never suffer a woman with a fortune to go at large. I happen to know what she put into the offertory on Sunday. By-the-bye, she can go to church if she cannot visit, though to be sure she sits in her crape with her veil down as if that man Sir Benjamin—"Big Ben," I feel inclined to call the original of that picture—had not been dead a year. After hearing the vicar advocate

the claims of the Ashford Infirmary, she sent him a cheque which was twice as much as the whole church collection. I call that not altogether in good taste—ostentatious and absurd, when one sees her very plain way of living; still, there can be no question of her fortune and her command of it, and one must bear and forbear with one's neighbours.'

CHAPTER XIV.

MAHOMET GOES TO THE MOUNTAIN WHEN THE MOUNTAIN WILL NOT COME TO MAHOMET—LADY JONES CALLS ON HER LANDLORD AND HIS SISTERS.

THE June afternoon sun was beating somewhat scorchingly on Blackhall—its broken sundial, run-wild holly-stack, lilac and may bushes over-blown, and the ruby-red flowers of its fuchsia hedges. Though the air of the great moor is in general as deliciously fresh as one of its springs, and often cuttingly keen, yet at certain seasons of the year it will sometimes throb with a palpitating heat. This is especially the case when there is an orange mist, in which all the sun's rays appear to be caught and held fast, hanging low over the ground and half shrouding its rough pasture, purple heather, and low golden furze, burnt down in autumn and not suffered to grow higher than the heather, to which it presents a broad contrast of colour; while horses, cattle, and sheep loom out from the misty veil, magnified into gigantic proportions. The warm haze doos not as a rule occur before July, but seasons sometimes anticipate each other. The breeziness of the atmosphere on these occasions is converted into a strange breathlessness, under which one labours and waits, expectant of the thunderstorm which may never come, or may content itself with passing over a portion of the moor at twenty miles' distance. But even if spared the jagged lightning throwing up the whole lonely landscape in unnatural prominence, and sheets of rain as blinding for the moment as drifting snow, it is difficult, even when the sun's rays are low and slanting instead of vertical, to escape the impression that there is danger of being sunstruck under heavens so full of condensed light and heat that it is no longer possible to gaze up into the blue, hanging over the billowy waste as if to consume it in the contact.

Pedestrians—even autumn sportsmen, the most zealous of pedestrians—fight shy of the moor on such days, and its natural denizens, whether of river or marsh, seek shelter as far as they can get it. That might be the reason why an adventurous visitor, arriving unexpectedly at Blackhall, found the whole family, as might not otherwise have been the case, in the poverty-stricken sitting-room.

Jem was at his desk, going over his accounts, which he was accustomed to do, again and again, with sickening reiteration. Either he was a bad accountant, or he had some vague unconfessed dependence on persistent calculation discharging debts and wiping out figures so often studied. Anyhow, Jem Endicott was rarely to be seen in his own house without a pen or the stump of a pencil between his fingers, and a file of papers on the desk before him, or a note-book in his other hand, on which he worked for hours at a stretch. He might have been a besotted poet if one had judged solely by his addiction to writing materials. In that case he must have wooed a tragic Muse whose productions fell still-born from the press, so gloomy were his looks. But it was not a superb gloominess, rather a dull churlishness, and his most irritable moments, as his sisters could have told, were when he was engaged with these everlasting accounts. Such a moment had just gone by, leaving an unpleasant recoil and sulphurous fumes behind it. Lucy, who was painting a daub of a water-colour, had asked some tiresome question—Lucy had rather a genius for asking tiresome questions—about the weather; and in his reply Jem not only snubbed her viciously, he took occasion to pour out a few of the vials of his wrath. He said that if she must interrupt a man when he was busy, it was a pity that she could not do it for a rational purpose. In short, he expressed in the curtest manner possible his regret that she was not able to find a better occupation. The washings from a fine lady's paint-box would not provide her with the necessaries of life, which, if things went on as they were doing, he was sorry to say he could not supply much longer. The assertion was true, though doubtless it might have been made in a more considerate and agreeable manner, but poor Jem would have argued back again that ruined men cannot be expected to pick their phrases. Lucy, with a feeble 'Oh, Jem! what can I do?' whimpered as silently as she could manage it behind her drawing-board. She was not so silent, however, that her little sighs and sniffs did not reach Jem's ears and enrage him still farther, though he continued to sit dourly and present an impassive side-face at his desk.

Celia, who was not doing anything so meritorious as weakly copying a weak water-colour, stood idly by one of the windows while she hummed with evident enjoyment, half under her breath, the tune and words, so far as the title went, of an ancient ditty,

My lodging is on the cold ground.

Jem heard that too as he doggedly totted up his fives and tens, and vowed in his angry heart that two more exasperating pieces of feminine goods than these useless sisters of his never existed to drive a man into the Bankruptcy Court, where his name had little need to flourish again, or into a lunatic asylum.

Now there was Kitty Carew, at whom they would turn up their fine-lady noses—Kitty had not cost her father a penny for the last four years. When she was in her school he was bound to say, since the parson knew what he was about, she could put better writing and ciphering, grammar and spelling, through her hands than these two madams could ever accomplish at their boarding-school. When she was at home she could turn her hand to anything, from fattening chickens to making beds. She could bake the week's bread, fry a trout, iron her father's shirts, and mend his stockings better than her middle-aged cousin, Miss Betsy, could—better than any old woman at Oxcleeve, withal she had been, till of late years, the prettiest little thing on this side of the moor or on any other. People said she had fallen off, but Kitty could never fall off to those who knew her sterling qualities and prized them. Kitty did not want entertaining, and you might pitch into her without finding her take the mean advantage of playing a set of waterworks on a fellow. She might pitch into you back again, but that would not be half so bad. Kitty had her own trials, which she bore like a brave, faithful little woman, without saying a word or drooping a feather. Was a fine creature like Kitty always to suffer and be sent to the wall in order that these girls should be kept up in their airs and graces, their poor make-believes at work which was no good to any living soul, their whining and sauciness? Were a man to make up his mind to throw up the sponge and start fair, having the coolness to laugh in these girls' faces before he departed where they would never follow him, to the ends of the earth—Manitoba or Florida—and turn settlér there, Kitty would be the best wife in the world for him. He should have drawn a prize in the lottery of life, at last, if he could induce her to follow his wandering footsteps.

At this unpropitious moment Sally Beaver entered the room, without the ceremony of knocking; she wore no cap, and her iron-grey hair was decidedly ruffled above her gaunt face. She was holding by the corner of her soiled canvas apron, between her still more soiled thumb and forefinger, a bit of pasteboard to be offered to her master with the additional information: 'Her do be waiting with her pony-chaise and her bit beasties, at the gate.'

Jem took the card, looked askance at it, and read aloud the name on it, as if by compulsion. '"Lady Jones"—what is she doing out in the heat? What is she seeking here? Is this some of your tricks, you girls?' and he glared at Celia. 'This is a fine place for visitors to be shown into!'

'I am so sorry that I have made the table untidy,' lamented Lucy, in accents of conscious guilt. She was not content with being sorry. She caught up her dirty palette and glass of water and hurried them into Sally's hands, while she recklessly covered her handkerchief with red, yellow, blue and green spots

in removing the traces of her work. She cast a despairing glance round at the state of her cushions and mats, for when they were not lying straight and smooth—when one was tossed here and another was kicked there, as Jem was in the habit of disposing of frippery—they were worse than useless in imparting the dainty elaboration which their author strove to lend to the bare and mean room.

Celia stretched out her arms in one of her insolently indifferent attitudes. 'You give us credit for more than we deserve, Jem. As we have not the honour of knowing the lady, and as she has the good fortune to be your tenant, the compliment must be paid to you.'

Jem was brought to book, and driven to be brutally candid. 'I don't know her,' he said; 'I never spoke to her in my life. Fielding made the arrangements, and preciously clear he must have made them if she has come here already to ask for repairs and improvements, as I don't doubt she has; but she has come to the wrong quarter, I can tell her. I say, cannot one of you girls bestir yourself? Go down to the gate, tackle her, hear what she has to say, and be decently civil to her, while I lock up my papers.' (Jem always treated his accounts as if they were Bank of England notes which an impecunious world was coveting.) 'The woman cannot walk like other people, I believe, and perhaps won't get out of her trap, or if she does I make no question that she expects everybody here should wait upon her, and lend her some assistance.'

'And I shall be most happy to do it, if that is what you wish,' cried Lucy, bustling away—only too eager to do anything she could.

Celia did not move. 'I am remaining to keep you in countenance, Jem,' she explained, with a wave of her hand; 'to be within call, lest *you* should want assistance, lest you should faint, or anything. Besides, one of us is enough to act as your porter or parlourmaid.'

When Lucy reached the closed gate, she found that Lady Jones outside had alighted without any help, save that Beaver had taken the ponies' reins. But her face was very white as she stood in her plain black dress, which might have been that of a religious order, for mortification and penance, before the closed gate and clutched at the bars for support.

'Oh, Lady Jones, I am so sorry,' cried Lucy breathlessly, opening the gate. 'I must introduce myself,' she broke off, always strong in forms and ceremonies. 'I am Lucy Endicott—Jem Endicott's younger sister. I know you are Lady Jones, for I have seen you in church, and often from a distance when you were driving on the moor. What a hot day for you to come out in! Please let me give you my arm. My brother is at home—he is busy, he is always so busy, but he will be pleased to see you—he sent me down to say so,' stammered Jem's representative.

Lucy need not have been frightened in case she should say anything wrong, for Lady Jones was certainly too much exhausted to pay heed to a set speech. She must be a very nervous woman, too, for when Lucy took the gloved hand to draw it through her arm, she felt it thrill at her touch and send a quiver through the whole body.

'You are very good,' muttered Lady Jones with her pale lips.

'Yes, I am tired. I dare say I should not have ventured out in such oppressive weather, but I thought that on that very account I should not miss you. Oh, thanks! it is pleasant to be helped like this. I shall be all right when I sit down.'

'Beaver, call to your wife to bring a chair into the hall,' Lucy had the presence of mind to direct.

In place of being all right, Lady Jones was all wrong in the meantime. Lucy could feel that her companion was shaking in every limb, and could hardly keep on her tottering feet. Her hand on Lucy's arm closed on the slender support with a convulsive grip. She was forced to lean so heavily that when the two came within the fuchsia hedges into the porch, Lucy had almost to drag her visitor across the threshold.

'Oh dear!' the girl could not help crying in alarm, 'I wish Jem would only come down.' But though Lucy had been educated under a professor of English literature, and had been taught to read and repeat a good many of the masterpieces of the English classics, she left it to another woman, who had been under no professor, English or foreign, to recall by a flash of thought the attitude of Christabel and Geraldine before the castle of the poet's unfinished dream.

'I shall be all right presently,' repeated Lady Jones, with a slight chatter of her teeth, while she gave a quick glance round the forlornness of the stripped, neglected hall. But she made a great effort to recover herself, and succeeded to such an extent that she got up and went on with comparative firmness, hardly appearing to heed Lucy's awkward, half-insincere explanation—though Lucy talked herself into the belief of many things—'You see, Lady Jones, Jem has only furnished part of his house, and he is leaving the hall to the last, I suppose.'

The room which the Endicotts used as a sitting-room was neither of the old public rooms—both of which were so much larger that the nakedness of the land would have been doubly conspicuous in them. Lady Jones took in both the present, and what might have been the past, of the place, without difficulty; while her eyes strayed instantly, even before she greeted Jem and Celia, to one of the wainscoted window-shutters, as if attracted by some half-obliterated pencil-marks which were still to be faintly traced there.

Jem was enough of a gentleman to come forward with a shamefaced apology. 'I ought to have called on you, Lady

Jones,' he said stiffly but not discourteously, 'only I have a great deal to do and am not remarkably clever in getting it done, as Fielding may have told you. I have slipped out of the polite forms of society. In short, I have no manners, which is not wonderful in a stock-farmer,' he ended, a trifle sulkily.

She held out her hand and looked him wistfully and searchingly in the face with those great questioning eyes of hers. 'You must not say that,' she said, with her peculiar gravity and habit of taking things in earnest, together with her absolute directness of speech. 'You are my landlord and have done all that I wish, while I desire to be as good a tenant to you as I can. I never cared for forms, and there are not many kept up in the Australian bush, but we may be friends on the ground of our present relations if on nothing else,' she said again, with the beseeching look in the bright eyes set in the face which was at once old and young.

Jem could not do otherwise than take her hand, while she took his and grasped it for a second, as a seal of their friendship, before she dropped it.

Jem could not lightly turn aside what was unconventional in her bearing, as a man on better terms with himself and the world might have done. He felt awkward and uncomfortable, which with him meant becoming rapidly restive under a lady's unaccustomed advances—he could hardly call them blandishments. He did not know what to make of his visitor. He had a consciousness that if she had come to solicit favours in the shape of new grates, or cowls to the chimneys to stop smoke, or fresh flooring to keep out the rats, she was not going about her business quite in the ordinary way. Besides, Fielding had professed to save a great deal of trouble by doing his duty in telling her at once that all such grumbling petitions were out of the question here.

In the meantime Lady Jones was encountering Celia. There was something pathetic in the wavering step with which the elder woman approached the younger, who did not meet her half-way—so wavering that it caused Lady Jones's hand to tremble as she held it out.

But Celia saw nothing of the pathos, and if she had seen it would have cared still less either for it or the open hand. She contented herself with a slight bow, a 'Good morning,' and a hard stare which made its own of what she saw; for she told herself as she turned away, 'She may be Jem's sort and Lucy's, but she is not mine, like Tony North. She means to come round us for reasons of her own, no doubt; but she will not come round me, unless I have my reasons for humouring her. I have no fancy for posing along with Jem and Lucy as poor unfortunates, impoverished and disgraced by the sins of our predecessors, in order to fall in with the whims of a whitewashed Lady Jones who occupies the Court, keeps two starched maid-

servants, contributes liberally to the Reverend Miles's offertories on Sundays, and on week-days drives like a female Jehu along the cart-tracks on the moor, so that one never knows when and where she will turn up. She is a horrid nuisance of a spy. She resembles the rag-and-bone man, or the man who went round with family washings when Lucy and I had the misfortune to belong to Miss Penfold's flock. It is my private opinion that the woman is mad.'

Lady Jones stood still for a second, looking at Celia's hands lightly clasped together, without expressing a shade of resentment or any feeling save that of dumb pain and regret. The betrayal of it was a source of lively gratification to the morbid temper of the offender, and at the same time caused her to despise the person against whom she had sinned, ten times more than before.

The visitor took the chair which Jem had handed to her, drew a long breath, and then, as she had promised, was sufficiently recovered not only to listen to the prattle which Lucy supplied, but to talk in her own person—if not like a woman of the world, certainly like her reasonable, quiet self.

As it did not transpire from Lady Jones's talk of the difference between the Australian and English climates and between colonial and home life that she had any motive in her visit, beyond the supposed obligation to make the acquaintance of her landlord and his family, Jem, who rather prided himself on not being a ladies' man, soon excused himself and went out, leaving the stranger to the tender mercies of his sisters.

Lucy was an adept at small-talk, and ran on in a shallow limpid stream, the chief elements of which were the weather, the moor—which was not equal to corn-fields or woodlands, while it represented the scenery of the neighbourhood—and the dreadful difficulty of having no shops to speak of nearer than Ashford.

At last Lucy had nearly expended the pearls of her discourse, and had recourse to the summer visitors beginning to quarter themselves in the farmhouses skirting the moor. She did not know any of these birds of passage—she was not in circumstances to make cursory acquaintances, or, for that matter, acquaintances of any kind. She spoke with a little hesitation from this consciousness, and from the twin consciousness that it would have been a great deal more natural to speak of the few resident gentlefolks, supposing she had really felt herself one of them. But poor Lucy, with all her amiable make-believes, was not able to do that; and not being able, she could not assume the feeling, as Celia could have assumed it, without the slightest scruple for any end of her own, or merely to throw dust in the eyes of a listener.

Lady Jones scarcely heard her entertainer, though she was not constitutionally an absent-minded woman, and though she

had come to Blackhall with the express purpose of making the Endicotts' acquaintance and of learning all she could about them. She was yielding to an influence which carried her mind on another current, and only spoke an assenting word now and then.

Occasionally Celia condescended to interpose with a remark generally disconcerting to her sister or to their visitor, or to both.

Lucy noticed Lady Jones's eyes wandering here and there, and showing a perverse inclination to settle on the pencil-marks on the window-shutter, but she took no notice of what must proceed from accident and not design. It was Celia who drew attention to the undesirable direction of Lady Jones's vagrant glances.

'You may be tempted to think that we add up our accounts on our window-shutters, as I have heard university men sometimes write their notes of lectures on their linen cuffs, but indeed we do not,' she explained with a great pretence of sincerity and candour. 'We have enough of accounts here, but when we write them down we confine ourselves to paper. I am not sure that we have the wit to do anything else. If we had, we might keep them still more continually before our eyes by embroidering them in columns on our frocks, or my brother might sow the columns in his turnip-fields, as amateur gardeners and station-masters sow their names and the names of their stations in flower-seeds in their plots and on their railway banks. I am afraid that I must confess to being guilty of plagiarism. I suspect that I have borrowed the idea from our vicar's exceedingly lucid description of the Jews' phylacteries. I hope you admire the Reverend Miles's eloquence, Lady Jones, for if you don't you will find yourself in the minority here.'

Lady Jones frowned a little and said nothing. It was clear that she did not regard the dragging in of the vicar's name as in particularly good taste.

Lucy hastened to make a diversion in the conversation, while she turned the cheeks which had grown brilliantly pink full upon her visitor, in preference to exposing their heightened colour to her sister.

'Celia likes to talk nonsense. This room was the old schoolroom. I told you my brother had not got his house in order yet.'

'He is a long time about it,' put in Celia, with the most naïve air. 'He has been settled here for the last six years.'

'There was a custom of marking the children's height as they grew, on that shutter,' went on Lucy, 'and it had been done on one occasion with so sharp a pencil that it won't rub out We must wait till we have the painters in the house. Celia and I are not there; it was before our day,' she said hastily, as she detected an amount of interest in Lady Jones

which might forebode a proposal to examine the shutter with an accompaniment of awkward questions. 'My brother's name is there, and, of the four other names, two are those of a sister and brother older than Jem, and two are of little brothers between him and us, who all died long ago,' said Lucy, with a fall in her voice befitting the sadness of the statement.

'Yes, and there is a fifth name, that of the eldest of the family—she is dead also,' said Celia composedly.

'I should like to look at them,' said Lady Jones abruptly. She did not ask further permission, she crossed the room and stood before the shutter. The record, in a sloping handwriting all awry, ran as follows:—

Anna, 5 feet.
Laura, 4 feet 8 inches.
Tom, 4 feet 6 inches.
Jem, 4 feet.
Bill, 3 feet 1 inch.
Baby, 2 feet 4 inches. (He was held up by nurse, and as he did not like it, and struggled, I dare say his height is not accurately given.)

Beneath the other writing a short sentence was written in a different and bolder hand:—

Jack still holds her own.

Lady Jones stood and stared at the characters, rather scratched than written, which refused to be erased, till a cloud came before her eyes. She might be a highly imaginative woman, to whom the simple chronicle was enough to bring vividly before her a family group in one of its few and far between moments of harmony and happiness, ere the home-life had been blasted. She might see the bustling, important mother, the blooming children, the father, a little apart, professing not to care for the small ceremony which was intended, no doubt, to be annual till the time of growth ceased, but impelled to notify his satisfaction in the supremacy of his firstborn child and favourite daughter.

Where were they now, the mother presiding in the place of honour, the excited, amused boys and girls, down to the rebellious baby, the watching father, shy of watching such womanish folly, which involved wildly random, truly feminine measurement?

Lady Jones spoke at last in a low, subdued voice—'There were many of you then;' yet her eyes did not travel up and down the list of names, the most of them no longer heard on earth. Her gaze was riveted, as if fascinated, on the last scrawled sentence: 'Jack still holds her own.'

Celia spoke with a jarring laugh, in answer to her ladyship's long look. 'But we are most of us dead, didn't you hear Lucy and me say? and well for most of us—a good riddance, people would say, if the truth were always in fashion.'

'Oh, Celia!' protested Lucy half under her breath, in horror.

'Well, Lucy,' retorted Celia undauntedly, 'you don't mean to say that you wish the dead alive again? Poor miserable little creatures. I hope you have more sense and good feeling. What would your clergyman say to you? Does he not preach that all is for the best?'

'Do you mean that all the members of the family whose names are written there are dead, with the exception of your brother?' asked Lady Jones. Her manner was still dull and mechanical; she spoke as if she were goaded into speech by Celia's flighty, irreverent way of dealing with the subject.

Lucy hesitated and looked up at the dim writing, while her colour went and came.

'Yes,' said Celia with unfaltering decision, 'all of them. We are three, and I believe I may say without any great sin against modesty that we are improved specimens of the rest of the lot. By the way, Lucy, how like your writing is to those scratches on the shutter! I don't know that I have observed it before.' The last remark was in itself harmless enough, but it was delivered with a peculiarly offensive, malicious intonation.

Lucy winced and was silent. Suddenly Lady Jones turned upon the girls in a white blaze of indignation. 'And why should the two handwritings not resemble each other?' she demanded. 'This is your mother's handwriting, is it not? And why may not the daughter's writing be like that of the mother, whose little pet she was, doubtless, in her childish days?'

Bold as Celia might be, there was something of the bully in her when she was grasped as one is bidden seize a nettle. She ceased to sting for the moment, while it was certain that she would not forget the indignity of the grasp. She laughed confusedly, and the next instant tried to turn the tables. 'I dare say you have had enough of our juvenile dimensions as scribbled upon a window-shutter,' she said, addressing Lady Jones. 'What shall we do next, fly into a passion or pick each others' pockets?'

'We'll rather go home, at least I shall,' said Lady Jones. Whatever force of association had caused her to fly into a passion, her wrath had subsided as quickly as it had risen. She was not only calm again; there was, looking at the difference in age and position, an almost piteous determination on the part of the widow of the late Sir Benjamin Jones to take everything which passed between her and the Endicotts in good part—to resent nothing and get on friendly terms with them. 'I hope you will come and see me soon—often—as often as it suits you, and bring your brother,' she begged them, quite flurried in her anxiety to propitiate the girls—so much younger, of so much less consideration, than herself. 'I don't visit, so that of course I have hardly any visitors. You will not meet anybody that you may not care to meet—tell your brother so; neither he nor

you need scruple on that account. I shall have you all to myself,' she ended, with a quick sigh.

'At least you are honest, Lady Jones,' said Celia sarcastically, 'you hold out no false lights, you don't propose to tempt us by inducements which have no foundation.' Celia was herself again in the outspoken scorn and truthiness—the fashion of the hour—which in her were exaggerated to the verge of distortion. Lady Jones had cast the pearls of swift relenting and humble kindness at her adversary's feet, and Celia's natural impulse in such a case always prompted her to turn and rend the unwisely generous, wasteful shedder of the pearls.

'Oh, Celia, I am sure we shall be very glad to accept Lady Jones's kind invitation,' exclaimed Lucy, who was often tired of her own and of Celia's company, and felt truly grateful for the prospect of a change.

'And Jem,' said Celia demurely, 'will Jem feel very glad too?'

'I—I hope so; I trust Lady Jones will forgive me if I cannot speak for my brother,' said Lucy, with a little spirit, but with the ready tears of vexation starting to her eyes.

'Certainly,' said Lady Jones, with anxious gentleness. 'Come yourself, if the others will not come—you may depend on being heartily welcome.' Celia made a mental note of the compact, and appended to it what lawyers call a rider. 'Not if I know it, Miss Lucy; I'll soon put a stop to these absurd preliminaries to an impossible friendship. You are not yet out of leading-strings, my dear sister. You are not to get away from me—nobody ought to come between sisters. You belong to me by right, and you are necessary to me in default of anybody better.'

Celia might alter her mind any day. She had repulsed Lady Jones's advances in sheer perversity, and in order to make herself of more consequence by holding back a favour when it was solicited. But it might suit her in time to come to do otherwise. She might find some counterbalancing advantage and entertainment in carrying on an intercourse to which everybody was not made free. Celia considered that Lucy was an entirely different person. What was for her, Celia, was not for Lucy, in the light of those selfish motives which were always paramount with the elder sister. Lucy was not worth very much, whether as a companion, a butt, or a scapegoat; but, anyhow, she was not to be allowed to slip through Celia's grasping fingers.

CHAPTER XV.

A MODEL CLERGYMAN AT HOME.

WHAT the Reverend Miles North's vicarage lacked in extent of view was compensated by its snugness. What the house missed in dignity was made up in cosy comfort, and a modest rural picturesqueness. Oxcleeve Vicarage was situated in the cleeve itself, and was at once sheltered and hidden by the wooded banks which rose on either side of the river Bar and of the public road. The last, finding no other means of ingress or egress, had to be content to run by the river. Fir trees, with unusually large holly bushes, prevailed principally in the cleft of the moor, which had a background of rocks tufted with broom and bracken, chiefly prized as furnishing the best fox-earths within many miles. There was ivy in abundance in the cleeve, outrivalling the ferns and heather; and there were a few fine beech trees close to the water, indicating the character of the climate and soil.

There was not another house in the Reverend Miles's parish —not Barnes Clyffe, not even the house of Mr. Lacy, the sleeping partner in the button business, which had been purposely built in the most romantic situation in order to emulate some old Italian castle perched among crags overhanging a pass in the Apennines—could vie with the vicarage in the possession of ample protection from the rough moorland wind, and in looking secluded and tranquil. In its tranquil aspect it was far beyond Mr. Lacy's house of Thorn. That had pepper-box turrets, and a mild attempt at battlements, which, if they meant anything, indicated a dim recollection of the warfare of the Middle Ages, whereas the farmhouse style of the vicarage, its low weather-stained walls, its heavy irregular thatch-roof, neither of them much more modern than those of the Court—its adjoining offices, which helped to close in the nondescript garden of flowers, vegetables, and orchard trees, in the middle of which the house stood, breathed only of peace and the arts of peace.

The Reverend Miles, who allowed himself very little licence in his course, relaxed his stringency so far as to take a human interest in his garden, and in the solid simple propriety of his house, which was as free from threadbare shabbiness and resounding emptiness as from pompous pretension and flimsy splendour. He had some knowledge of gardening and some taste for it, and he prized the rich fruitfulness and floweriness that a little care served to bring forth within his small domain, which formed a great and pleasant contrast to the wild bleakness of the moor without. He had also a liking for the dumb creatures of his stable and yard, noticeable in so grave and reserved

a man, though perhaps not so uncommon in natures like his as one is tempted at the first glance to suppose. He kept no hunters, but the moor ponies which he rode and drove on occasions, though they were not Katerfeltos, were as well treated and brought as near to perfection as horseflesh maintained for purely domestic purposes could be. His cows were as scrupulously cared for; his cocks and hens were examples of handsomely-dealt-with, handsomely-conducted fowls. He always fed his pigeons himself, and did not object to their alighting on his head and shoulders, perhaps remembering St. John and his rabbit. He cultivated bees, and attended to their prosperity also. Altogether, though Miles North was, in his unresting diligence, coupled with his severity to himself, distinctly a product of the nineteenth century, his *ménage* and garden, even when he was present, had a quaint flavour of Goldsmith and Sterne about it. You looked before you at the old apple and pear trees, the tall hollyhocks, the round cabbages, the red roses and white lilies, and beyond them at the dovecot and beehives, then back at the low thatched house with long benches in front, until you could have believed that the Vicar of Wakefield in his shovel-hat and gaiters, or Parson Adams with his long clay pipe, would presently appear on the threshold.

But as there was a serpent in Eden, so there was a flaw in the decent orderliness of the Reverend Miles's home, and a canker in its wholesomeness. The offence lay in the company of the vicar's cousin, Mr. Tony North. What induced the young clergyman to consent to the scandal nobody could exactly say, though there were various explanations vouchsafed on the sole authority of their originators. Some said that in his youth Miles North had been greatly obliged to the parents of his cousin Tony, and was now paying the penalty in the compulsory discharge of a debt of gratitude. Some would have it—and there was a colour given to both the first and second hypotheses, by one circumstance—the Reverend Miles had no nearer surviving relatives appearing on the scene—that the two men who now diverged so widely in principles, habits, and tastes had as boys been schoolfellows and close companions, and that a lingering recollection of the old tie induced the vicar to let his decorous establishment become the refuge of a scapegrace whose sole small chance of reforming the error of his ways and recovering the credit which he had lost lay in the amount of countenance still lent him by one so unlike himself. There were also speculative people who took up the idea that Miles North's endurance of the presence of his cousin Tony was not so much a self-inflicted penance, or a piece of charity, as an act of spiritual pride. In his sacred calling, he, who was strong and resolute in the mauling of his inclinations, would fain cope with the greatest difficulties. He could not submit to be defeated on any count. As St. Christopher had been driven to take service with the

devil—because he would only yield himself bondsman to the strongest—till he found his true Master, so the vicar of Oxcleeve elected to befriend the polished scamp, the well-bred reprobate, *minus* conscience and heart, of social life—one of the most hopeless products of evil—till the priest could overcome him by the might of his mission. Doubtless there were a few grains of truth in each of the different suppositions which professed to give a reason for the vicar's apparent inconsistency in permitting Tony North to live with him. It need hardly be said that in the single combat the Reverend Miles came off second best; that all his Christian, manly, and gentlemanly weapons of forbearance, and silent appeal to the last remnant of good feeling in the moral wreck were either shattered or turned aside when they were wielded against the cold, smooth, glittering surface which had been presented to them for a couple of years.

There was only one advantage which the clergyman could be said to have gained in the protracted struggle, and it was certain to have its weight with him—to wit, the power of minimising Tony North's capacities for mischief to the smallest point. Dwelling with his reverend cousin in the remote, thinly peopled moorland parish in which Miles North's influence was real and strong, Tony could not well march an army into the enemy's country and burn and ravage on every side of him. He was reduced to a light skirmishing with such materials as he could find in the cause of the prince of darkness. The 'Furze Bush' was beneath his notice, that at once repelled him by its clownishness, and was not subject to such gifts as he could exercise. Besides, Jem Endicott was frequently there, and Tony North had not only no fancy for encountering Jem—he, Tony, had already tried his hand, just to keep it in practice, in that quarter, and the experiment had proved fruitless. It was simply when Mr. Tony could encounter the idlest and fastest of the sportsmen squatting around Oxcleeve, or make his way to Ashford and inveigle silly boys and girls into his net for small gambling, petty dissipation, levity, and general deceit, that he could accomplish trifling guerilla marauding. Tony hated Oxcleeve and everything connected with it, but he had no resource at present save taxing his cousin's hospitality, and doing all he could with any outward grace to vex and thwart the dispenser of the hospitality. 'Serve him right,' muttered Tony through his moustache, waxed and curled up at the corners in order to make him look a fiercer blackguard than he really was. 'He intends to take it out of me in pulling me up and keeping me straight. Confound his clerical impertinence! It is a mean, low advantage to take of a fellow when he is down in his luck; but I'll be even with him yet!'

Latterly Tony North had been happy in finding a way to elude Miles North's efforts to render him harmless, and to worry Miles to a degree which the vicar could not even bring himself to own.

The sole word to be said for Tony North was, that though he had in full the cold heart and the good digestion particularly desirable for worldly success, he had not been successful. Indeed, he had little else to employ on his own behalf except a quick sneering tongue, being the larger part of the social coin which he had picked up freely while he was running through his patrimony and ruining his chances in life. He had not Celia Endicott's excuse of a miserable family history to account for his hard nature and moral depravity, but neither had he above a tithe of Celia's brains with which to make his way in the world, and for which to account on a day of reckoning. At this time he was a less innocent Micawber waiting for something 'turning up,' depending besottedly on the good offices of influential connections and friends whom he had either tired out and alienated long ago, or who had forgotten his very face the moment it had passed out of their sight. His cousin Miles was the single person who still stood, in a way, by Tony North, and Tony was prepared to reward Miles according to Tony's kind.

The two men were together in Miles's study on so fine a June morning that it admitted of both the low broad lattice windows being thrown open, admitting a flood of light, as well as a summer wind bearing all the sweet scents of the garden and moor upon its wings. The open air acted differently on the different occupants of the room. The clergyman with his fair-complexioned, immobile face, which would not tan, stood in the sunshine without winking, and lifted up his head as if he liked to feel the stirring of his blonde hair and spotless tie. Tony shivered, shrank, and blinked. He even ostentatiously turned up the collar of his morning coat and moved his chair into the shelter of one of the window-curtains, as a covert reproach to his host who had opened the windows. Tony bore no family likeness to his cousin except somewhat in size and build. He was not merely dark where the other was fair; his thin sallow face, with features of the nut-cracker type—already decidedly pronounced—might be classed by their owner as distinguished and aristocratic, but they could never by any stretch of the imagination have been called handsome. There was one respect in which they bore anything save a resemblance to the repose of Miles's straight nose, firm lips, and full inflexible chin. Tony's features were in constant motion. His critics said he gibbered as well as chattered. He was really a little younger than his cousin, though he looked older—to the extent of having a worn, exhausted air; but that might be partly affectation, like the turning up of his coat-collar against the light morning breeze.

Where Tony North got his clothes and his pocket-money was a mystery to most people, but he seemed still to have dealings with a fashionable tailor, for his morning coat and all the other items were faultless and in excellent condition; whereas the Rev. Miles's coat looked as if it had been made by a man who

had copied the fashion of the other coat and just missed the secret of its perfection. The first article was somewhat weather-beaten also, and the wearer's boots betrayed traces of wanting repair, in keeping with the coat. It was as if the vicar had not always spare money to *keep* his wardrobe as much up to the mark as he was bent on keeping everything else with which he had to do. On the other hand, he was by no means indifferent to the broadening and whitening of a seam, the cracking of leather, and the threatening separation of soles and uppers in boots. A missing button, the effect of a splash of mud, the frayed edge of a cuff, fretted him considerably more than they fretted far inferior people; but he could master the fretting. Miles had been up hours before. He had held early morning service for the behoof of eleven worshippers, including himself and his clerk. He had breakfasted. He had gone the round of the offices. He had come in again to be busy about some parish work, while Tony had dawdled down from his room within the last half-hour, and was still engaged in what he would have called 'pecking' at the food on the breakfast-table, though in fact he was steadily eating into it with an excellent appetite.

Miles, in place of settling himself with the least possible commotion and delay, according to his wont, to whatever he had to do, walked in an uneasy random manner from the bookcase to the window and back again, as if he had something seriously disturbing his mind—which was precisely what he had.

'Excuse me, my dear fellow,' exclaimed Tony, showing himself ruffled in spite of his languor, 'why will your boots creak so? You ought to get damages from your bootmaker. And, by the way, you should speak to your cook about these kidneys; if she cannot send them up hot, then I should make the house too hot for her. As a matter of principle, never take carelessness from a servant. I am surprised that you do not look at the thing in that light.'

'Speak to Hicks yourself about it,' said Miles hastily, and then his sense of justice rebuked him. 'I dare say the kidneys were sent up hot, at the proper time,' he added, by way of amendment. 'You are aware I don't keep a large staff of servants; neither is my kitchen, like the kitchen in a great house, supplied with every convenience, including ranges of hot plates. Hours must be attended to here. But I wish to speak to you on something of much more consequence, Tony;' and Miles flung himself impatiently into his chair, sighing by anticipation, and confronted his cousin.

'Glad to hear it, Miles,' said Tony, with his mouth still full of the disparaged kidneys. 'You rarely spare a moment for my entertainment. In the words of a once favourite song, "Peter never thinks of me." I suppose it is the way of the world—I'm not worth thinking about. But, upon my honour, I am at a loss to imagine what can be of more consequence in this desert

than kidneys piping hot *versus* kidneys lukewarm. Faugh! What mare's-nest have you been finding lately, my dear boy?'

'I have been finding no mare's-nest, and I wish to Heaven you would be in earnest,' said Miles, in rising heat and vexation.

'Softly, softly. Never was there such an irascible clerical. Indeed I am in sad and sober earnest for the most part nowadays. What on earth should I find to jest about here? But, equally, what on earth would you have me do? Weep and bemoan my hard fate?'

'You had better do something to better your fate,' said Miles drily.

'Don't I try it on with every breath I draw?' urged Tony, with a malicious twinkle in his eye.

'I don't see that it will do you any good,' continued Miles angrily, 'unless in the shape of a momentary and far from honourable gratification, to behave in a way which you know that no gentleman—I do not say no honest man—would allow himself to do. You must be sensible that you could not do it were the circumstances different—that you are taking gross advantage of the difficulties of the situation and of a young girl's ignorance and inexperience.'

Mr. Tony did not examine his nails, but he did what was still more provoking. He looked Miles in the face with an exceedingly amused expression in his own shifty glance, as if he found, to his surprise, that his host had at last condescended to minister to his guest's intellectual wants and had been supremely successful in the ministration.

'What young girl, and what situation?' he asked, putting down his knife and fork, and sitting up in his chair as if he were fairly interested. 'Perhaps you will do me the favour to point that out, after you have had the amazing candour to tell me in your own house that I am not a gentleman—we'll let the honest man pass, as you say. Pardon me, Miles, but your calling is not improving your manners.'

'This is not a question of manners,' said Miles sternly; 'and you know very well that I am speaking in reference to the Endicotts,' he ended, with an involuntary droop of his eyes, and a faint colour rising in his pale face.

'Oh!' cried Tony, 'the murder is out!' and he leant back and pressed the tips of his ten fingers together in a bravado of ease and relaxation. 'It is the old story: I am not to interfere with his reverence's rights and privileges.'

'Tony, if you don't take care what you are about,' cried the usually calm Miles furiously, 'I'll pitch you out of one of these windows, though I were ten times a clergyman.'

'I don't doubt you would try it,' said Tony composedly. 'I don't doubt it in the least; but though you are a shade bigger and stronger than I, there are two at a bargain-making. Then

there is your bishop, my good man, with the scandal in the Church and the parish, and the bad example to the servants. Don't forget the bad example to the servants.'

'Look here, Tony North,' said Miles, grasping the arms of his chair to keep his hands employed; 'I have told you already that I will not have this affair, or whatever you call it, going on in my parish. It shall not receive any countenance from me. I will not be met by gossip about it wherever I turn. I have borne a good deal from you for various reasons, but there are some things that I will not stand. I have warned you of this before.'

'Then, in addition to your unexampled goodness, of which you magnanimously remind me, will you take the trouble to state the things which you cannot stand? You do not mean that I am accountable for the Endicott family and their agreeable antecedents? I am a poor enough devil myself, but I fail to see how that makes me accountable for the presence in this favoured locality of—poor angels, shall I say? with their wretched *ménage* and odd unconventional ways.'

'You are accountable for meeting and walking *tête-à-tête* with one or other of the Miss Endicotts continually,' said Miles deliberately. 'You rowed her alone for a whole rainy afternoon last week on Deveral Pool. You were seen with her again, as you have been seen before, in the twilight and the moonlight, on the Ashford road as late as ten o'clock at night. Are you aware of what you are doing? Do you ever consider how you are compromising the unfortunate young lady by such foolish, reckless conduct? You are penniless and burdened with debt, which you cannot pay; and I should simply be ruining myself, and defrauding the poor of my people, if I were to attempt to discharge any portion of it. Your future is a blank. Marriage is the very last idea you ought to have in your head; indeed, I do you the justice—scant enough in this instance—to feel convinced that you have never entertained so preposterous and impracticable a notion.'

Notwithstanding his proximity to the farthest window Tony tittered, 'I do not deny that I am a miserable sinner. I have got into a good many scrapes in my time, and have been called upon to answer for them, and found it highly inconvenient. But I assure you, Miles, I was never asked my "intentions" before. The experience is not at all unpleasant. I dare say it may not be quite so agreeable where there is a possibility of one's having intentions. As it is, it makes one feel a "warm" man, with a nice comfortable balance at his banker's, instead of a penniless individual beset by black looks and protested bills. It implies also something nearer a steady old boy—as sweet and artless as a curate, and as virtuous and energetic as his vicar.'

'Tomfoolery!' ejaculated Miles indignantly.

Tony composed his countenance and resumed: 'When a man is accused of any offence, he expects, as an indulgence to which he is entitled, not only that a charge should be made, but that the whole facts of the case should be laid before him. You speak in a general way of the two Miss Endicotts, with whom I am said to be guilty of being intimate—nay, more heinous misdemeanour still, with whom I may have so far forgotten myself as to flirt, in a mild way. Which of the two Miss Endicotts does me the honour of being my accomplice? Was it with Celia or with Lucy that I was seen walking by moonlight and at ten o'clock at night? By the way, that is a naughty fib of an exaggeration—I remember hearing your stable clock strike as I turned in at your gate, and it struck the quarter—the three quarters past nine, while I had parted with this vague and shadowy Miss Endicott of yours at least a quarter of an hour before. Oh, you misrepresenting, evil-judging, clodhopping gossips of Oxcleeve! don't you know that half-past nine by the clock is a maid-of-all-work's innocent hour for returning from an outing? Why don't you preach one of your eloquent sermons, Miles, on the sin of a man, or most likely a woman—for I can see the flutter of petticoats as well as of a cassock in this storm in a teacup—bearing false witness against a couple of neighbours?' Tony spoke not only with the utmost effrontery; there was an accent of lurking triumph, only half subdued, and an echo of unholy glee in his defence.

Miles endured it with difficulty. 'I don't wish to enter into particulars,' he said coldly. 'You have done enough by your selfish pursuit of your own pleasure, and your utter disregard of the consequences to others, to compromise any one who is foolish enough to trust you. It is not my intention, whatever yours may be, to drag the name of the young lady into the transaction farther than can be helped. All I say, Tony North—and it is once and for all—is: I tell you you shall not live under my roof and continue to practise this miserable game of playing with a girl—I don't care of what degree—making a toy of her heart and her reputation.'

'Perhaps she is playing with me,' said Tony meekly.

Miles went on without deigning to notice the interruption. 'I may say, further, that, bad and heartless as the game is, if it were anything worse—anything infamous—you should not remain here another hour.'

'You have the cure in your own hands,' said Tony, with a shade of sullenness for the first time stealing into the light manner in which he chose to treat the discussion.

Miles raised his eyebrows, which, like his mouth, were capable of supercilious curves, and gave a jerk to the knee which he was now clasping with both hands. Was Tony also among the prophets, that he should suggest an antidote to the poison of his own brewing?

'It strikes me,' resumed Tony, 'that there is what would be on the whole a less objectionable course, and one which without question would be more efficacious than any weak attempt at tampering with a man's liberty of action.'

'Under stern necessity, and in a good cause,' muttered Miles.

'You coolly propose to your own flesh and blood, your social equal—I suppose I am still your equal: though I have wasted my goods on what you may call "riotous living," I have not disgraced my name; I am not a criminal,' declared Tony, as if he were stating a highly meritorious fact; he went on with still more resentment and passion in his voice—'yet you propose to me restrictions which no man with the spirit of the most abject cur would subject himself to.'

'They are restrictions that every upright man is bound to subject himself to,' retorted Miles.

'That is your opinion, is it? You had better hear me out before you give it,' replied Tony, mastering himself sufficiently to return to his rallying tone, while he stood up and leant against the chimney-piece. 'I must walk out while I am in this cursed hole. You will allow that, especially as you have been rather stingy about giving me the use of those poor brutes of yours?'

'You broke old Smoke's knees, and brought back young Bob with his mouth galled and raw,' said the vicar laconically.

'Then I must walk, for I hope you do not mean to keep me a prisoner in the house and garden—a nice little friendly arrangement for one's host and kinsman to propose. No, no. Exercise is essential to health—and you are great on health, my muscular shepherd and pastor. I cannot keep off the beastly moor, which stretches on all sides and swallows up everything else. It is not the most public of promenades, though it is the chosen resort of benighted visitors. It is full of lonely holes and corners, and I cannot tell whom I may or may not encounter in any of them at any time. I myself am not devoted to my own company as you are. I have no vocation for silent solitude, improving meditation and self-examination. I am not a mediæval saint with a mission to the bestial creation.'

'Nobody suspects you of such a thing,' said Miles sternly.

'Then I positively decline to pledge myself not to recognise a girl because I find her straying with the cattle and the crows to Stony Gate or White Ridge or Fox's Hope; or, if she be nearer home, when she has gone out, like myself and one of your patriarchs, to meditate at eventide, I tell you I must recognise her when I meet her, greet her, and lend her my escort if she care to have it. You take too much upon you as my cousin and host and the priest of the parish.'

'I should like to see you make that out,' said Miles grimly.

'Well, to put it plainly,' declared Tony, drawing his brows together with a scowl for a second, and the next instant smiling

blandly again, 'you interfere in matters in which no gentleman would meddle with another. I crave leave to tell you that, in return for your gratuitous information that I am behaving as no man of honour would behave. But you have always the alternative, Miles.'

'What?' demanded Miles sharply.

'This house is yours—a fact of which you have taken occasion to remind me more than once in the course of this agreeable conversation. Turn me out of it. Shut your door upon me. I, for one, am under the impression that I have trespassed too long upon your hospitality, which, let me tell you, is not your strong point. I have stayed an unconscionable time under your roof, which is not yours altogether, as you have kindly explained—it belongs primarily to the Church and the parish. I have taken an undue advantage of our relationship. It is a matter of moonshine, and, further, it is a matter entirely between ourselves that I have no other roof to shelter me. I dare say something will turn up. You have only to say the word.'

He could not say the word—not yet. Strong-willed as Miles North was, he recoiled from the alternative. It was the usual successful appeal of an ungenerous to a generous man, of a braggart and craven at heart to a true man and a modest at the core, though he might be a lion in his office.

'To go or stay rests with yourself, Tony,' said the vicar slowly. 'You know I have not grudged you my house. You can guess that if it were possible—if it rested with me alone—I would rather relinquish my own claim to it than deny yours, in the name of old boyish days, for the sake of your father and mother, who were as my father and mother when I needed them sorely. But I am not my own master, and I have a right to require that you should act in a manner becoming your shelter, becoming my cloth and your duty.'

With these words Miles got up and quitted the room. He was fain to put an end to one of many irksome and grievous altercations, from which all the comfort left to him had been that he had so far spoken his mind and cleared his conscience. 'He may think better of it,' reflected Miles, without much hope. 'I am convinced he has no other end in view than that of amusing himself, and he may calculate that there will be more lost than gained if he persist in this form of amusement; and she—when she comes to know the truth, poor, weak, deluded girl—may have nothing more to do with him. God knows what is to become of him. I have not his faith in something turning up; but, at least, I cannot, unless I am compelled to do it, cut away the last inch of ground under his feet.'

Tony North looked after his departing host with a sneer. 'So your little game, Mr. Miles—you talked of a game—is to play the *dog in the manger*. You will have nothing to do on

your own account with a deplorably silly timorous pigeon of a Lucy Endicott, hopelessly smirched in the persons of her predecessors and dragged down by her surroundings. That is not to be thought of for his austere reverence, the young vicar, who will choose a mate worthier of him. But Miss Lucy is to be left to sigh and adore him at a humble distance, while he is to figure as her champion and defender. Serve her right, the little stubborn, strait-laced fool!—when she might have been comforted in another quarter, instead of being made a tool of, and condemned or laughed at all round. Celia has more wit in her little finger than Lucy has in her whole body; yet, on the whole, I believe I prefer the demure puss. Celia is all very well as a solace in adversity, an excellent comrade to swear alliance with, and grin in the faces of the decorous natives—including my stiffly starched cousin. But she is sometimes rather too much even for me. By Jove! if that girl ever marries, I would not stand in the happy man's shoes for a kingdom. However, with Celia Endicott to back me, I'll be even with you, Mr. Miles. We'll give your sanctimonious tyranny a good deal more trouble before we have done with you, and with laughing in our sleeves at the whole rot of this stupid, savage, most terrestrial of paradises.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE VICAR ASKS LADY JONES'S OPINION ON WHITE SEAM.

As a matter of course, the Rev. Miles North visited his new parishioner Lady Jones, and almost as a matter of course he conceived a high opinion of her, though, like the rest of the world, he was puzzled to see what she was doing in Oxcleeve, and he was forced to admit that some of her ways were, to say the least, odd. Her avoidance of the small amount of general society, for instance, on the plea of her infirmity, which was no plea, in the light of her daily drives along the moorland tracks and her invasion of the tabooed family of her landlord at Blackhall. Everything is known in a village and a village district, and everybody, from Zecchy Sampson to Lovey Veale, had heard of Lady Jones's call on the Endicotts, and had delivered his or her opinion in various shades of the local dialect. 'Zome volks were mighty queer in the company they choz, when they might 'a had the pick of the gentry to dine and sup wi'. But Endicott of Blackhall, though he were down in the mouth, was my lady's landlord—there was no mistake there; and very like that was the risen why she chose the family, though they were none zo honourable in what they comed from, and none zo petickler in what they dooed, as the young squire and tew *boarding*-zchool misses ought to 'a been.'

Indeed, Lady Jones had not made any concealment of her visit, else she would surely have had the discretion not to announce it beforehand to Mrs. Reynolds, who was as good as a bellman round the skirts of the moor.

But the vicar was not repelled—on the contrary, he was attracted by the act of independence and daring on the part of his parishioner. He was thankful in his heart of hearts that these girls, so left to themselves, and apparently so ready to avail themselves of the isolation in order to run into mischief, should have the experience of a woman, an experienced, kindly woman of mature years, brought to bear on them—that they should be taken up by a lady who had an excuse for taking them up.

Miles North had no doubt that Lady Jones was a lady, judging her not by the external evidence of her position as the widow of a Sir Benjamin Jones, late governor of what might be reckoned a remote province of Australia, but by internal showing. She was not a very well-educated woman according to modern standards; and though she had seen a good deal of the world—regarding the term in the light of the four quarters of the globe, for she had been in America as well as Australia—the society in which she had mixed had been, perhaps necessarily, of a primitive character. But by endless intangible proofs which would have been as hard to forge as they were to catalogue, it was clear to any onlooker of ordinary intelligence that Lady Jones had been born and bred a lady, however rustic and reduced in her earlier circumstances; for she sometimes spoke, in her flashes of frankness, as if she did not care to hide that she had known poverty and hardship as well as riches and ease.

In spite of her physical defect, and of the incongruous blending of youth and age in her bright eyes and white hair, there was something at once agreeable and piquant in her personal appearance—in the tall figure with the slight waver in its lines and sway in its pose—in the face rounded and soft in its pallor—in her expression, generally calm but quickly and keenly moved at times. She had an attraction for thoughtful intelligent men beyond the age of boys—men like George Fielding and Miles North; a fascination which lay in her own thoughtfulness and intelligence as a match for theirs.

She was not like a younger woman occupied with herself, engrossed in the working out of the problem of her history. The first stages of her history were accomplished, while she was plainly not so old that life might not hold other experiences for her. She looked sometimes, in the midst of her outward tranquillity, as if she were eagerly anticipating fresh experiences

Still she was at leisure to attend to what was passing around her, and, as a matter of course, she noticed everything and laid it to heart. She was more of a quiet listener than a talker;

but she could and did talk admirably, with originality and earnestness, though it was neither on politics, nor literature, nor fashion. She talked on natural phenomena at home and abroad —on this Devonshire moor as contrasted with the Australian bush and the American backwoods; on the wonders of the sky above and the wilderness around—whether the last were a wilderness of coarse grass, furze, and heather, or prickly pear and blue gum-trees, or shoreless waters; she talked on plants and animals, but especially on country and village life, with which she seemed to have endless sympathy. She was never tired planning, and carrying out her plans, for the benefit of her poorer neighbours.

Lady Jones was a perfect treasure to the Reverend Miles, beset, even on the verge of a moor, by dangerous, frivolous young ladies and pompous, interfering old ones. He ranked Lady Jones as old enough to be available for a friend, while she was wise enough with the modesty of true wisdom not to abuse the privilege. Scandal was set at nought by her silvered hair and the perpetual insignia of her widowhood in the plain black gowns and mourning caps, at which Mrs. Reynolds cried out with alarmed *esprit de corps*. Besides, it was difficult to think of scandal attaching to Lady Jones in her simplicity and sincerity, and in her gravity, which was only roused and lit up now and again by flashes of humour like her flashes of frankness. It was a relief and rest to Miles North many a time to open the wicket-gate of the Court, walk down the flagged path, and sit for a little while in one of the unadorned parlours with its mistress. He could be as silent or as talkative as he liked. She always met him halfway, unless when he lost his temper, and his good breeding with it, and allowed himself to hint at the trying nature of the assistance which Mrs. Reynolds and several like-minded ladies of uncertain age among the summer visitors in the neighbourhood were prone to render him in his office. Then Lady Jones would only smile faintly and say nothing, and he felt afterwards that he respected her the more for the silent rebuke which she had dealt to him. The material refreshment which she offered him was of the simplest description—a cup of her tea or a glass of her Australian wine. He could not help being somewhat of a connoisseur in tea and wine, and he was inclined to pronounce her Australian vintage—of which she was innocently proud, with a pride perhaps derived from the late Sir Benjamin—poor stuff, and her tea no better than what might be had from any respectable Ashford grocer; but the spiritual refreshment she gave him made him ashamed of criticising the other. She was evidently careless of what belonged to the comforts of the table as she was indifferent, in spite of her so-called lameness, to soft seats and easy lounges; a nun vowed to poverty and austerity could hardly have been more so. He never once caught his hostess reclining on a couch, or in an

easy chair, as he had surprised Mrs. Reynolds when she was surreptitiously taking her afternoon nap. Cushions were only a trouble to Lady Jones, and, like hand-screens and flower-glasses, got in her way. Clearly, the late Sir Benjamin—if he had been a man of the people, which seemed most likely—had lived and died a Spartan, with a grand scorn of self-indulgence, which men of the people, of all men, are least given to display.

All the time Miles North comprehended that Lady Jones's hardy, well-nigh frugal practice was habit and inadvertence; that if she had guessed for a moment that any of her few visitors desired a haven of springs and air-cushions, a cup of souchong, a glass of madeira which had been more than once round the Cape, she would have taken the greatest pains to procure it for the fastidious individual's benefit, and would have pressed it upon him, as she did press the clotted cream—the single local luxury which was to be found in perfection at her tea-table.

The longer he knew her the higher grew the Rev. Miles's esteem for the latest importation among his parishioners, until a bright idea struck him in connection with her and himself. He wished some lady to inspect the sewing classes in his school, of which little Kitty Carew was the mistress. He liked to keep the school as much as possible in his own hand, and he felt himself competent to inspect and pronounce on every other department of the institution; so that the Government inspectors, when he summoned them to see what he was doing in the matter of education, and to make him a grant from the public funds, would be the most unreasonable of men if they did not declare that the standard he maintained was excellent. But he could not take it upon him to sit on the comparative merits and demerits of the sewing. He was a little at a loss to understand how the inspectors—seeing they were but inspectors and not inspectresses—could be more competent than he was in the matter; but that was their business and the Government's, not his. He had great faith in little Kitty, whom he had so far reared and trained for his purpose; but his faith in her was not so absolute that he should feel himself justified in confiding solely to her ability and discretion a branch of teaching in which he was inevitably deficient, the neglect of which might bring discredit on the whole establishment. Kitty Carew had answered very fairly as yet, but she was little more than a year out of her teens, and she had been, to his regret, getting out of health for some time, while her spirits had gone down in proportion. She was not the bright, capable little girl she had been three years ago. He had found fault with her about some trifle one day lately, and instead of standing up for herself with no lack of girlish complacency and self-reliance, and an almost comical air of outraged justice, she had distressed him by bursting into a passion of tears. She was not at all given to tears; he had never seen her cry, even in her pupil days. Fortunately, none

of the scholars had been present, and she had controlled herself instantly, and looked grievously affronted at her own childishness, so he had let the thing drop without more ado.

But if Kitty were ailing and not mistress of herself, she might be tempted to 'scamp' the work of the one department in which there was no danger of his interference. Or it might be her single-handed responsibility in this matter which was weighing on Kitty's mind, and rendering her still further out of sorts. He had thought of two things. He might appoint a committee of ladies to report on the sewing class. But so many ladies would consider themselves qualified for the appointment that the selection of reporters might be a more ticklish and invidious affair than the naming of a choir leader. There must be limitations; yet any limitation would require to be of a very delicate nature which should keep Mrs. Barnes of Barnes Clyffe from bringing her girls, always on the wing for any fresh occupation and entertainment, or Mrs. Lacy from introducing her unmarried sisters who were visiting at Thorn, and crying out against the dulness of the country and the dearth of engagements of any kind. Finally, a luncheon party, or at least an afternoon tea, must be organised at the vicarage for the benefit of the committee; and he had great doubts, not so much of the capabilities of Hicks, his housekeeper, as of the proper behaviour of his cousin Tony on the occasion, especially if young ladies gained admittance to the gathering. He had thought of conquering himself, and requesting Mrs. Reynolds to walk over with him to the school and pass her judgment on the girls' sewing. But oh the manner in which she would dole out her decisions and magnify her temporary power by sitting upon poor Kitty and the girls, and on him also! He would never hear the end of it. Having been rashly invited by him to put her large, imposing finger into the pie, Mrs. Reynolds would not be satisfied until she had thrust her whole colossal hand after the finger.

But Lady Jones was a very different person. Every woman knew more or less about sewing, and she was sure not to be an exception. If she could be induced to do him the favour he believed the dilemma would be disposed of in the pleasantest manner. For it would be a gratification to him to go over his school with her and hear what she thought of it. She might not be learned—she might not even have been as carefully grounded in elementary knowledge as he flattered himself these children were; but he put so much dependence on her excellent common sense, and her judgment generally, that he felt her approval was well worth securing. He considered that her feelings were altogether friendly towards him; he even thought that she took a stronger interest in him and his work than he could altogether account for, seeing that she was not the style of woman who viewed her parson and his parish as necessarily her private property. Anyhow, he should hear the truth from her without

having it coloured by the medium through which it passed. She would do her part as simply and unobtrusively as he could desire, and there would be the agreeable conclusion of the whole matter.

Miles North was absolutely elated by his bright idea; but when he went to solicit Lady Jones's co-operation he found her out—as he might have expected—early on the afternoon of a day which had begun with torrents of rain and was ending in a stormy splendour which did not bode well for the weather of the next day, but was likely to call forth any lover of nature. He could only hope for better luck next time. Next time, so far as meeting Lady Jones went, was nearer than he had counted on; for as he was returning past the church and school he encountered the object of his search. She was driving her ponies down the lane in the most opportune manner, apart from the drawback that she was not driving alone; and the lady who was in the carriage with Lady Jones was also an acquaintance of the vicar's, a youthful acquaintance—Miss Lucy Endicott.

At any other time Miles, who had the interests of many people at heart, would have hailed the incident with satisfaction, arguing from it the increasingly friendly footing which was being established between Lady Jones and her landlord's family. So far as Lady Jones's feelings and wishes were concerned, he would not have been wrong; but apart from this, the truth was that Celia had fulfilled her intention of barring the way to all intercourse, save what was of the most formal kind, in which she took care to share, between Lady Jones and Lucy. It was by the merest accident that the two had crossed each other's paths when there was no third person to come between them, on the major village green, among the ducks and geese; and the elder had stopped her redoubtable steeds and invited the younger to join her. Lucy had accepted the invitation; not without considerable inward perturbation, because of the light in which the expedition might be regarded by her domestic tyrant. But, having made the experiment, there was no doubt it had turned out well for the pair concerned.

Lady Jones had begun by humouring Lucy in giving up her ladyship's beloved moor and driving instead through a succession of the steep, deep lanes, which were almost as characteristic a feature of the landscape as the moor itself. Lucy loved the lanes, while she recoiled from the savage moor. She was always in pursuit of hart's-tongue ferns and supplies of foxglove, honeysuckle, and virgin's-bower to make up for the lack of flowers at Blackhall. She had quite a pretty fancy in mosses, wild strawberries, harebells, potentillas, herb Roberts—all the small fry of flowering plants which formed the groundwork of the banks of the lanes. She had no objection to clusters of brambles and nuts, even in their most unripe stages. They served as evanescent decorations for the barebones parlour at Blackhall.

Lady Jones was very good-natured. She stopped her ponies over and over again. She did not complain of muddy shoes and skirts, and never wearied of waiting, as Celia did when Lucy was getting her spoil. Her ladyship went so far as to apologise in the most unaffected manner for not being able to get out and scramble in her turn. She pointed with her whip to the devil's-bit scabious, declaring that its intense blue shamed the blue harebells—not to say the lavender of the ordinary scabious, and was as fresh as the moor itself, to which it belonged like the heather and the furze.

Lucy was so much the better for the rare encouragement and indulgence, that her blue eyes cleared and deepened like the most vagabond of scabiouses. Her pink colour freshened to a wild-rose tint; her yellow hair was like the pale gold tentacles of the honeysuckle. She began to prattle about her fancy work, the school she had left, her Uncle and Aunt Lowndes at Teignmouth with whom she and Celia had stayed for some weeks before coming to Blackhall.

Lady Jones looked down on her companion and listened, smiling, and sighing from her superior experience, whatever it might have been. Certainly it did not impair her interest in Lucy's stories, on which she hung with an attention which flattered Lucy extremely.

The couple were as unlike as a pale widow between thirty and forty and a blooming girl of twenty can well be; yet the alliance was singularly becoming to both of them. The young vicar felt as if he had never seen Lady Jones's womanliness appear to greater advantage, or Lucy Endicott's girlishness so sweet and bright—so piteously lamb-like for it to fall into the clutches of a wolf like Tony—as it looked to-day. At the same time her presence interfered considerably with his comfort and with the perfect prudence of his preconcerted plans. He imagined himself under the necessity of doing more than take off his hat to the pair. He must go forward and tell her ladyship his object in calling on her half an hour before, and try if she would make an appointment with him to visit his school. It was awkward to enter on the subject before a third person, and that third person Miss Lucy Endicott, who was an adept with her needle; but in his present frame of mind there seemed no help for it. Miss Lucy Endicott was reasonable, and had struck him as the reverse of forward—rather a timid, retiring girl, in short. He could not imagine that she would feel aggrieved by not being included in a proposal which he could only address with fitness to an older and more responsible woman. Miles stood uncovered at the ponies' heads in the middle of the wet road—just where it began to emerge from the hollow and to wind among the broken hillocky ground with a tuft of heather here and there to mark the locality—and rushed into his petition.

Lady Jones, to begin with, had the air as if something had just happened to her which had been very pleasant, therefore she listened with a gracious and cheerful countenance. Lucy twisted together the stalks of the devil's-bit scabiouses which she held in her ungloved hand, and glanced at the speaker with artless and disinterested admiration.

'I should be very glad to be of use to your school, Mr. North,' said Lady Jones at last; 'but I am afraid I am not very well qualified. I never was a very good sewer of white seam, or, I am sorry to say, of any kind of seam, though I had to do it formerly, both when I was young and when we lived in the Bush. Somehow I seemed to fall far short either of the faculty or the opportunity of bringing my sewing to perfection; though I was not early spoilt by sewing machines. Now I dare say you had one or two in your school?' taking Lucy into the conversation.

'Oh no!' cried Lucy, eager to vindicate herself from a suspicion which might tend to lower her in the vicar's eyes. 'I can sew plain seam quite well. Miss Penfold did not approve of machines except in the hands of sempstresses and dressmakers. We did not make our own clothes at school, of course,' went on Lucy with her air of gentle dignity, 'but we had to mend them; and we had a basket for the poor, one afternoon a week.'

'Then I have no doubt that you sew far better than I; suppose you undertake to inspect the schoolgirls' work?'

Had Lady Jones lost her head, on which Miles had put such dependence, that she could make the outrageous suggestion? He was put out to such a degree that he felt he looked it, and he hated to show his feelings at any time.

Even Lucy blushed, and hesitated at the unsuitable promotion thrust upon her.

CHAPTER XVII.

KITTY CAREW IN HER SCHOOLROOM.

APPARENTLY Lady Jones recollected herself. 'Could we not both go with you now when we are here?' She made a quick amendment on her original proposal. 'We are passing the school, and I don't think it is dismissed for the day. You would have the benefit of a couple of opinions instead of one. In the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom.'

She had disentangled herself adroitly from the labyrinth she had got into. This was better—a great deal better when he came to think of it, especially after he caught Lucy Endicott's expression of eager expectation. This was, perhaps, the most sensible notion which had occurred to anybody yet—to make the examination off-hand, without agitating Kitty or the schoolgirls

by a previous intimation on the subject; to be able to say afterwards to the persons who had a right to an explanation, 'Lady Jones was driving by, and was good enough to look in, at my request, and tell me what she thought of the work.' It was an arrangement with which the greatest busybody and carper could not find fault. Autocrat as he was in his own person, his office exposed him to fault-finding, especially from his lady helpers, which even he was not always strong enough to nip in the bud and to treat with supreme indifference.

Nobody was likely to inquire whether Lady Jones had been alone or accompanied by a friend. Even supposing the truth leaked out, supposing Lucy Endicott's tongue ran wild on the compliment which had been paid to her—she had been put too much beyond the pale of the upper ten of the parish for the echo of her tongue to reach them, or supposing the schoolgirls recognised her, as to be sure they must, and gossiped about her visit to the school, who listened to the gossip of schoolgirls? After all, the matter concerned himself and nobody else.

The more the Rev. Miles had time to think of it the more he was inclined to regard Lady Jones's appearance on the scene just then and there as a most fortunate coincidence. He accepted her offer with becoming gratitude, while he would not let himself dwell on the attractive spectacle of a delighted face beneath a shady hat wreathed with a grey veil. He did not take in the grey veil. He had lost sight for the moment of anything which the veil's conjunction with a grey cloak might have recalled to him—anything with which Lady Jones was probably totally unacquainted. She did not practise Miles's reserve in making the most of the gratification she had conferred. She looked at Lucy Endicott's pride and pleasure as if she enjoyed witnessing them. She kept adding to them by associating herself and Lucy in the kindest possible manner. She dwelt on the association as if it also were very welcome to her. 'You and I will do our best,' she said caressingly to Lucy.

With all the restrained force of character that was very plain in Lady Jones, any one who had listened to her with Lucy might have been awakened to the fact that along with the force there was probably in the childless woman's breast a repressed principle of motherhood, a half-dumb capacity of infinite fondness and indulgence latent in her from childhood. 'You and I have never done anything together save take this little drive. Let us try what we can do—you and I. Let us hope that we may yet accomplish wonderful things together some day. What do you say, Miss Lucy?' Lady Jones said in a tone of wistful jesting.

What could Lucy say, except that Lady Jones, to whom she had not spoken more than half a dozen times before to-day, was only too kind, too good? The tears—happy tears in this instance—which were always so near Lucy's eyes, sprang to them at the stranger's kindness.

Lady Jones was sharp to distinguish not only the fleeting moisture but the inference of strangeness between the two. 'Ah, yes!' she said half disconsolately, 'we are strangers to each other—there's the rub.'

In the meantime the vicar was conducting his allies up the side-path to the brick school-house, from which the shrill voices of young children singing their hymn of dismissal were issuing. Indeed, the bigger boys and their master, tenants of the larger half of the building, were gone some time before; while a troop of smaller boys, just let loose, were scampering off in every direction—all the more fleetly because the vicar's hat loomed on their horizon. They were not, if they knew it, to be arrested, turned back, and subjected to another trial of their juvenile endurance. Only one extraordinary youngster lingered, and he was amply rewarded by having Lady Jones's ponies consigned to his charge, thus providing him with an opportunity for an uncensured study of horseflesh in the present, and the pleasing prospect of a reward in pence for the congenial study, in the immediate future.

Miles North's school was a model school, and when he entered without knocking, everything was in order. The spotless white-washed walls garnished with the usual maps—geographical, physical, astronomical; the black-boards flanked by the handy lumps of chalk; the very floors and benches, so regularly and scrupulously scrubbed as to bear only the mud and dust of a single day; the books and slates in orderly files; the needle-work which the visitors had come to look at, either still held properly in the hands of embryo needlewomen, or tidily folded up and deposited in its own cupboard; and on the teacher's desk the fresh flowers, though they consisted chiefly of daisies, honesty, and thyme, and were in no more elegant receptacle than a water-jug: all did credit to the Rev. Miles and to his *protégée* and schoolmistress, Kitty Carew. The girls, great and small, in their calico frocks—a few of the biggest, like the smallest, in overgrown pinafores, after the fashion of some of the working girls in Mason's pictures—rose simultaneously, bobbed curtseys, and looked out of the corners of their eyes with much feminine interest at the intruders. 'Her in black be the widdy woman, Lady Jones, from t' Cooart. Her in the rare bonnie white and red gownd be one of them Endicott misses from Blackhall, sewer.'

The mistress came forward to greet the clergyman and his friends. When she had heard his step and voice as he entered she had looked up a little languidly, but without flutter or discomfiture, as at a friend whom she was accustomed to see most days at any hour. When she saw Lady Jones she stared, though whatever surprise and excitement she might feel were held in strict bounds by her schoolmistress's primness and sense of propriety. But when she saw there was a second visitor, though it was only one of them Endicott misses, whom she knew perfectly

well both by sight and reputation, she grew very red, and a flurried, annoyed air came into her whole face and bearing. Perhaps she resented the intrusion, particularly when she was not well, and had not been prepared for what was coming.

It was all very good, or bad, for the Reverend Miles to swoop down upon her in this fashion with an elderly lady (considerably over thirty is elderly to twenty) like Lady Jones, though he had never done so before. But he ought not—no, not though he was the vicar, and this was his school—to bring in a girl of Kitty's own age, very likely no better informed than the little schoolmistress, who had worked so hard to inform herself and to please the parson in the happy old days. Neither was Miss Lucy Endicott so wise and prudent on her own account, if all tales were true, that she should be picked out to domineer over Kitty, and look down upon her in what should have been her kingdom as well as the vicar's.

Kitty Carew was as unlike as possible to the typical innkeeper's daughter, the Kate Kearney with her smiles and dimples, her blending of respectful deference and engaging affability. On the other hand, she was very like the typical normal schoolmistress—that nondescript shadow of a lady, who is yet not a lady—who is talked of as Miss So-and-so, and appealed to occasionally when an additional reader is wanted to make up the number for the book club, or—taking it for granted that she has some natural turn for music—when another soprano or contralto is required for one of the songs at an amateur concert, she is dealt with on terms of comparative equality so long as her services are needed in the matter of books and songs. But she is never—whatever wildly sanguine and foolishly erroneous hopes she may have entertained, founded on the selfish appeals which are the beginning and end of any acknowledgment of her superior intelligence and education—admitted within the intangible but insurmountable barrier which separates the lady from the working woman and the moderately well-to-do upstart.

There was no trace in Kitty Carew of a working girl's awkwardness or forwardness, nothing of a tradeswoman's obtuseness or pertness, of the alternations between slovenliness and over-smartness, with the lack of any sense of harmony and proportion, which are said to mark out an inferior woman from her superior. She had not even an air of shabby gentility, which *faute de mieux*, where other airs are concerned, sometimes takes their place in the circumstances.

Kitty's manner was, as a rule, composed and self-assured—so composed, for her not long completed teens and her small size, that it had filled her father, Tom Carew, of the 'Furze Bush,' with the most unqualified admiration. He had sworn that if he had cared to thwart the young parson's views for Kitty, and to put an end to her career as a schoolmistress by establishing

her instead as the 'missus' of his inn, he could have trusted her to cow and control the most obstreperous customer as well and better than he could do it himself.

Any lady might have worn Kitty's gingham gown, and linen collar and cuffs, the *tout ensemble* was so simple, cool, and fresh. She did not add to them even a gilt brooch, with earrings to match; or a silver locket, with a bangle *en suite*; and she was guiltless of a fringe. Yet Kitty did not look the lady she was not, except it might be in the secret recesses of her inmost soul; and the consciousness that she did not was sore and bitter to her, in spite of all that was good, clever, and sensible in the girl's character.

In what did the vague distinction lie? Lady Jones was a lady, though nobody knew who her father and mother were, and she had certainly spent a considerable portion of her life in the wilds, where, as she would not scruple to tell, what it would almost take away Lucy Endicott's breath to hear, she had often been under the frightful necessity of cooking her own food and washing her own clothes. Lucy Endicott was a lady, though she had come of but sorry gentlefolk, and her shallowness and weakness, however artless and unstained as yet, would never weigh in the balance against Kitty's mother-wit, resolution, and constancy.

A year or two ago Kitty Carew, just growing up, had been out of sight the prettiest girl in the neighbourhood—so pretty that her beauty might have been a snare to her in any other position—so pretty that, even as it was, if her father, Tom Carew, had not been a thoroughly respectable man in his line, proud and independent; if the Rev. Miles had not been a pattern of clerical virtue and dignity for his years; if Kitty had not shown herself, in her small way, as staid and decorous as he was, her beauty might have brought upon the vicar the scandalous insinuation of having been influenced by his eyes in the favour which he had always displayed for young Kitty's ability and diligence as a scholar. There had been a great deal worse scandals, even where the clergy were concerned, in the old Devonshire world. But this was a new world, in which iron conceptions of duty and fitness reigned.

Kitty was by nature a warm-coloured brunette, an English version of the Moabitess on whose firm round cheeks

> Such a blush
> In the midst of brown was born,
> Like red poppies grown with corn.

Her stature was low, but she was finely proportioned, and, as in the case of Louis XIV., when you were looking at her you forgot her smallness. It was quite true that she had been called in on emergencies to help the schoolmaster to awe the biggest and most mutinous boys in the school, and that the introduction of Kitty on the scene had always been a success. The impression

which her *petite* person gave was that there was nothing wasted in her. This was an example of the appositeness of the adage

> Small herbs have grace,
> Great weeds do grow apace.

What she lacked in size was made up by her quite tremendous powers of energy and perseverance. In the case of her hands and feet, though symmetrically small, they were not small to deformity. In place of looking useless members of her body, they were clearly full of suppleness and nervous force. It was well known at Oxcleeve that Kitty Carew had not only the brains of a man: she had the cleverest woman's hands and feet in the village. Her features were delicately regular, though on rather too compressed and miniature a scale. Her eyes were dark hazel in accordance with her complexion, and with what might be called the warm black of her hair—black in which there was the faintest reflection of bronze or auburn—a tint entirely removed from that of blue-black. If there was a defect in her face, as it had been three years ago, it lay in her eyes and eyebrows. The eyes were small, though very quick and keen, with swift darting glances like lambent flames. The brows were at once too marked and too straight. Altogether, Kitty Carew's face, both in its moulding and colouring, excelled most faces, though it might remind the gazer of a valuable engraving in which the lines had been a hair's breadth too deeply cut; or of a gem of a picture, in which tone and feeling were marvellously preserved, and yet the quality of strength was just a shade overdone.

The description given in some respects applied more to Kitty as she had been when she first grew up than as she was now She appeared out of health, as she had done more or less for years. She had the habit of spending her annual school holidays with the family of a sister of her mother's, whose husband tenanted a small farm on the outskirts of the other great twin moor of Devonshire. One would have thought that the change from the outskirts of one moor to those of another in the same county was not great; but those who knew them well said the climate, general landscape, and people's ways of Exmoor were not much more like those of Dartmoor than Wales was like the Highlands of Scotland or the Black Forest was like the Ardennes. And Kitty would not hear of any other change, though she came back each time looking worse rather than better. A faint purple tinge had stolen into Kitty's brunette richness of colour, with something of the effect of ruddy wine diluted by water. Her eyes had grown at once restless and a little dim, as if from feverishness and want of sleep. The lines of her small firmly shut mouth were at the same time relaxed and strained, as if weariness, and a supreme determination to fight against the weariness to the last, had combined to take possession of the girl.

The alteration in his daugher went to Tom Carew's heart; but it beat his honest wits, and those of his cousin Betsy, to tell what ailed Kitty, who scouted at doctors and their physic, and hated to have her failing health mentioned or studied in the least particular.

Lady Jones, with her thoughtful gaze, which seemed to take in every trifling detail, was sorry to see such a seal set on such a face, which ought to have been in its youthful prime. She could not help feeling full of speculation why it should be so.

Lucy, who had never seen Kitty Carew so near at hand, though she had often remarked her from a little distance, and had heard of her beauty, looked in her turn at the schoolmistress, and declared herself, to herself, disappointed. Lucy did use the Hibernianism 'agreeably disappointed.' Still she was slightly conscious that she had not been without an unconfessed, unclassified distrust and apprehension of the reputed personal attractions of the daughter of Tom Carew of the 'Furze Bush,' the mistress of the girls' department of Mr. North's school. If Miss Carew had ever been very pretty her good looks had not been of a lasting kind. They were unmistakably going off already. Some brunettes fade and age with frightful rapidity, Lucy reflected calmly, calling to mind her own yellow hair and fair skin, and not realising that if she and Kitty Carew survived ten or fifteen years Kitty ran less danger than her critic of a washed-out, superannuated-doll stage of beauty.

Miles named the two ladies to Kitty with his well-bred deliberate nonchalance, and she recovered her equanimity, and responded with civil if stiff self-possession. The errand of the clergyman and his companions was made known. It did not disturb, it rather relieved, the schoolmistress, who knew her bearings, and was aware that here, where she had been most left to herself, she had been doubly faithful in the discharge of her obligations. It was the scholars, who were instantly thrown into a nudging, tittering state of excitement, which Kitty found it hard to repress, when the samples of under-garments, major and minor, from father's best shirt to baby's new wrapper—which were to be submitted for the consideration of the worshipful Government inspectors—were, as a previous test of their merits, laid before the strange ladies.

It was an anxious moment, if not for Kitty and Lady Jones, for more than the unfledged British workwomen—treading on each other's toes and breathing hard in anticipation of the sentence to be delivered on their performance—for the vicar and Lucy Endicott, who entered with all her heart into the situation. Lady Jones had said she believed Miss Lucy Endicott would be better qualified than she was to be of use to the vicar and his school in this matter, and had requested Lucy's company and co-operation in the improvised visit to the school. Lucy fully believed her ladyship, for it was one of the girl's weaknesses—

engaging to some people, ridiculous to others—to be credulous with regard to what she was told by people who had a right to speak authoritatively. She was as much impressed with the serious consequences of the undertaking, and with her share in it, as the smallest child there who sat awestruck and had to put her thumb into her mouth to enable her to support the solemnity of the position.

It was therefore with the prettiest air of girlish importance, blushing pride, and modest confidence that Lucy flitted up and down the class and round and round the table, or hovered with meditative earnestness over the hemming and splaying and felling, the gathering and tucking of which she was so elated and happy to think she knew the mysteries. Lady Jones stood aside and smiled softly. The vicar absolutely unbent into sitting down on a table and indulging in a low whistle. Kitty Carew stood with her head erect, and the gnaw of the lips and twist of the mouth which was becoming habitual with her, and was spoiling its subtle curves. The flock of small girl pigeons emitted an imperceptible twittering.

At last Lucy arrived at a great conclusion, with a radiant smile of satisfaction and good-will on her fair young face—blonde like the vicar's, but with the girl's so different in colouring and expression from the man's in its pale shadowless fixedness, which at the same time Lucy regarded as the complexion fit for an Apollo. Lucy was rosy red, and tremulous with the eager emotion which carried her out of her timidity and her little formal precise ways. 'Oh, Mr. North,' she cried, 'you need not have brought us here. There was no occasion to have any one —the inspectors or any one. I have no doubt everything else is as good as the sewing, though of course I don't pretend for a moment to judge even the reading and writing before you and Lady Jones. But I do know about sewing, what good sewing is; and this is beautiful, quite beautiful. The best of us at Miss Penfold's could not have surpassed it—I am not sure that we could have equalled it; and the very beginners do so well. Oh, Miss Carew, you are a good teacher, I wish you joy.—I congratulate you, Mr. North,' ended Lucy in a little ecstasy.

A succession of broad grins from the girls passed, with the speed of lightning, like the instantaneous spread of an infection from one to the other, together with a truly feminine rustle of triumph.

Lady Jones smiled on with a mixture of sweetness and sadness if any one had found leisure to analyse the smile.

Kitty Carew's lips gave an ominous quiver. It might be that in her overdone and sickly state she could not endure praise.

The vicar had probably a suspicion and fear of this, for he sprang down from his table with an alertness that was hardly in unison with his usual curbed slowness of speech and action. 'I will not say we are very much obliged to you, Miss Lucy

Endicott,' he said cordially, 'but I will say that your good-natured approval deserves some acknowledgment on our part. I hope I am not mistaken as to the nature of the acknowledgment. Miss Carew, if that compliment to you does not call forth the cup of tea, which I know you keep on the premises, for the refreshment of the ladies, I do not know what will. Girls, if so good a report does not entitle you and your mistress to a half-holiday to-morrow, I am afraid your chances of half-holidays are small.'

Girls do not cheer and do not so readily clap their hands as boys do, but they can grin and grin amain with the best, till their jaws are in danger of cracking.

The school dispersed with as much tumult as girls could well create under the nose of the vicar, and the schoolmistress, and the incongruous little knot of tea-drinkers, were left to their mild potations.

It cannot be said that the tea-drinking, though it ought to have loosened tongues and broken down artificial barriers, was a success. Yet the little black teapot and common lilac and white cups which Kitty set out on a desk were not greatly inferior to the Blackhall and Court tea equipages, while the tea and bread and butter were quite as good as those to which two at least of her guests were accustomed. But a shadow fell on the party. Kitty presided over it still as if under a certain amount of protest. The vicar, while he waited impartially upon the others, and insisted on pouring out the water from the kitchen boiler, insensibly drew into himself, as if he began already to recollect himself, rue the step he had taken, and scent trouble in the air. Lucy's brief burst of spirits sank under the influence of the constrained atmosphere around her. She did more harm than good, and made herself look officious and inclined to amuse herself at the expense of her neighbours when, misled by the brilliant result of her first attempt at being useful, she volunteered her assistance in getting up the semblance of a dainty tea-table, and brought the jug with the nosegay from Kitty's private rostrum and put it opposite the teapot, which somehow it did not keep in countenance. 'Why, here is a branch of old-fashioned fuchsia with little fuchsia-bells, just like ours at Blackhall!' cried Lucy, hailing a familiar object.

But the innocent observation proved as inopportune as the rest of her attempts at geniality. Both the vicar and Lady Jones looked put out by it and said nothing.

Kitty Carew glanced up quickly, was silent also for half a minute, and then said coldly, with a manifest effort, 'That kind of fuchsia is not uncommon in out-of-the-way places in Devonshire.'

'What have I done now?' Lucy asked herself, discomfited and bewildered; and then a thought struck her, and she too showed herself *vexed*. 'Oh dear!' she took herself to task in

her own mind, 'what ill-fortune made me say that? I ought to have thought before I spoke. I believe Celia is right that I have my wits to seek. I had better have bitten my tongue out than called attention to the fuchsia, though of course there are plenty of old-fashioned fuchsias in Devonshire, and I dare say there are some in the garden of the "Furze Bush." But why did she not say that in so many words?'

Lady Jones, on the watch for every sign of what her companions thought and felt, relapsed into more than her usual gravity, in strong contrast to her striking amiability and cheerfulness throughout the afternoon. The change was in itself alarming to Lucy, always prone to fear that she had done something wrong. It was a relief to all when the tea was drunk and the leave-taking—in which the dignity of the clergyman and his friends was as nothing to the dignity of the schoolmistress, Kitty—came to an end, and the party separated, the Rev. Miles only seeing the two ladies into the phaeton, and escorting them as far as the main road.

Kitty Carew stood for a moment at the schoolroom door, looking after her visitors, before she turned to lock up her domain and make her way to the 'Furze Bush' for the night. There was an odd expression of wonder, which should have had pleasure in it, yet showed little or none, in the girl's face. 'I really believe I could have liked them—both of them,' she was thinking to herself. 'Well, it don't matter about Lady Jones. I dare say I shall never see her again; but it was the last thing I should have expected for me to have taken a sort of fancy for Lucy Endicott. I don't suppose she is very wise—a bit of a goose, I should say; but, eh! she meant to be kind. There was nothing high-headed or domineering about her, and she was fair and bonnie, as they say the mother was when she had the bad luck to come first to Blackhall—an ill-omened name and place to more than the Spanish Madam, though there is an old wife's tale that she "walks," and I have never heard that the other does. Lucy Endicott must leave the airs and capers and idle assumption of which both sisters are accused to Celia; and I don't believe Lucy is as useless and lazy as she is called if she knows what good sewing is when she sees it, and that is what few ladies do nowadays. She *is* a lady, though she has not herself to thank for that any more than I can help belonging to father and the "Furze Bush." Poor father! who is good to me, and thinks a heap of me—a deal more than I deserve, just as if I were a lady. Lucy Endicott was born to it, and to something more—something that helps to keep her humble; though it acts in the opposite way on the sister. I should say Lucy has her trials, what with Celia, what with Jem. Jem Endicott would not be an easy man to live with at the best. Poor Jem! he has had his trials too, and worse will come on him and his sisters—on this poor-spirited Lucy, who consents to hang like a

stone round a man's neck and help to drown him, for all so nicely as she speaks. I would have died sooner—I suppose because I am not a lady—than have done what she does to any man, were he my father, on whom I had some claim, instead of my brother. Not that I am a good daughter. No, I do not pretend that. Poor father! But about Lucy Endicott, the girl means well, I dare say, and she will be a sufferer in the end. Not that she would care to have my pity. Why, even Jem has a fight to swallow that.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

'GET WHAT YOU WANT, I'LL PAY FOR IT.'

Poor Lucy Endicott! even Kitty Carew, who could not help liking the little she knew of Lucy, had a half-contemptuous pity for her. More people than Kitty shared the feeling, though they were not aware of all the reasons they had for the commiseration any more than for the contempt. But Lucy, though she had some proper pride, would not have disdained pity as Jem scoffed at it, and Celia spurned it, and Kitty herself would have trampled upon it. Lucy would have received the condescending sympathy artlessly enough, as a not unwelcome tribute to her misfortunes, while she would have been all the sorrier for herself, because of the sorrow of others on her behalf. She was incapable of trading on the feeling, but she was not above being gently consoled by it. There was only one side of her history on which, to her honour, she was too sensitive and shrinking to bear a touch, a breath. Pity her and Celia because they were orphans and poor, because Jem was so inefficient and reluctant a guardian. Yes, all the world might do that, and Lucy would almost be tempted to pose as an interesting victim on this account; but hint that her mother had left her and Celia and their father, that she was no better than she should have been, and that Lucy's eldest sister, Joanna, had proved herself as little worth, and Lucy's cheeks would burn like fire or whiten to ashes; she would wish that the earth might open and swallow her up. Celia's malicious defiant allusions were sickening torture to Lucy.

At the present moment Lucy was suffering from a lesser evil, a more commonplace vexation, which was, nevertheless, very real and disturbing to the sufferer. It was the time-immemorial trial to young women who have aspirations, while they cannot command any means for the gratification of their wishes except what their parents or other natural guardians either dole out with a grudging hand or absolutely decline to supply. Unhappily, young women who must have dress and the minimum of pleasure,

if no more, while they cannot work, and are ashamed to beg from any save their unfortunate kindred, do not present a singular spectacle.

When the Endicott girls made their unsolicited appearance at Blackhall, they came in the last instalment of clothes with which their mother's relations had furnished the sisters—up to the time of their leaving school. Though the garments had been of the highest order of garments, which they were not, they could not be expected to last for ever; and as for any pocket-money, by means of which Celia and Lucy could buy their dress in future, they were as destitute of the possession as of the sinews of war by which an independent existence could be sustained for a week or day.

The girls' travelling expenses had been paid, and they were to apply in future to their brother, who was supposed to be his sisters' universal provider, with very little perception on his part of what was due to him and them. In the middle of his dissatisfaction and labyrinth of difficulties, Jem had anticipated his sisters' earliest application by telling them gruffly the shops in Ashford at which it was desirable for them to deal, bidding them get what they wanted, and asking the bills to be sent to him. Thereupon Celia had walked into Ashford, dragging her sister, who was not nearly so good a walker, in her train, and had bought with a high hand all that the heart of a young woman could desire—procurable in a market town. The order had not been so very much after all, but it had been sufficient to frighten Lucy half out of her wits, and to prompt her to whisper faint-hearted remonstrances, all in vain. At last, to counterbalance what to Lucy appeared her sister's lavish expenditure, she had taken refuge amidst Celia's jeering laughter in buying as little as she could possibly make serve for herself.

It was no good, so far as Lucy's exemption from blame and the preservation of her peace of mind were concerned, as Celia had ostentatiously pointed out to her sister. When the bill was sent in, Jem, totally unused to such an item in his accounts and appalled by its size, growled as savagely as if the whole contents of Worth's and Madame Elise's establishments had been spirited down to Ashford and bought up piecemeal by his sisters, with Jem left to pay the debt. He did not take pains to investigate which sister was most to blame, or who had made the most reckless additions to her wardrobe. He fell upon Lucy because she was most in his company, and her silly attentions and overtures for his regard brought her more under his notice. He proceeded to overwhelm her with harrowing reproaches and appalling threats.

'Look here, Lucy, I can't stand this. What are you about? What are you thinking of? Twelve pounds to Bliss, the draper, for plush and gold braid among other things. What have you to do with plush and gold braid? I thought plush belonged to footmen,

and gold braid to officers' uniforms. And eight pounds to that woman Denny, who makes gowns and bonnets that any idiot of a girl could make for herself. Are you mad? Do you suppose my pockets are full of money? I can tell you that I am at my wits' end for the men's wages and the cash to meet the house bills. If Sally Beaver did not take more care and screw them down, you would have to starve or go into the workhouse before winter. It will be your destination at last. Perhaps it will do the proud stomachs and saucy backs of some people I know a little good.'

'Oh, Jem, Jem! how can you say such terrible things!' wept and lamented Lucy, who, between unwillingness to turn the tables on Celia, and dread of her wrath if she—Lucy—did so, was incapable of defending herself, and at everybody's mercy as usual.

'Look here,' repeated Jem in his sternest tones, 'there must be no more of this cursed folly, or I'll throw up the wretched land and emigrate to-morrow, and leave you two extravagant madams to shift for yourselves—to go on the parish if you like. You must have ordered enough clothes to last you for years, and you had better make the best of what you've got. If you care to have anything more after what I have told you just now you must first come to me and tell me what you are up to. No more *cartes blanches* for you, after the manner in which you have abused them. I don't know that my expectations were very high, but I did think that you had a little more common sense and consideration, I may say common honesty, than you have shown. You have behaved like a couple of babies—not fit to be trusted to act for yourselves in the merest trifles, or to have the command of such credit as you can get in Ashford. Do you hear, Lucy? Can't you answer me, instead of sitting whimpering there? If you do not see to it I'll have to advertise in the "Ashford Chronicle" that I will not be answerable for your debts and Celia's. When I come to think of it, a man is not answerable for his sisters' debts; it is only by favour on my part, and on condition that you will speak to me before you incur them, that I promise to have anything more to do with them.'

It was easy for Jem to bluster and hector in this fashion. What was Lucy to do for the summer clothes which she did not possess? How was she to open Jem's eyes to the deplorable fact that, in spite of all which had to be paid to Mr. Bliss and Mrs. Denny, more must be expended as a crying obligation, unless he were prepared to see Lucy in laboriously turned, scoured, washed, ironed, and mended rags?

Celia laughed loudly when she heard of the dilemma, and cried, 'The more fool you, Lucy. The simple man is the beggar's brother.'

Celia might laugh if she had the heart to do it. Her drawers

were running over. She had not only levied a tax on Jem with disastrous heaviness; during the short visit which the sisters had paid to their maternal uncle and aunt before coming to Blackhall, Celia, simply by pursuing her unhesitating tactics, had acquired a smart yachting costume, in addition to an enjoyable short holiday. The holiday was over, and the moor was not the sea, still the yachting dress was very useful and presentable, as Mrs. Reynolds would have said. Its naval blue, tailor-made fit, and dandy buttons—dandy enough to have been the work of the great firm in which the well-bred Mr. Lacy slept, drawing a handsome share of the profits in his dreams, were decidedly becoming to its wearer, and caused Lucy, in her two or three times done-up two-years-old cashmere, of which the original light terra-cotta hue was merged into a dirty salmon-colour, to look a mere foil to her better dressed sister.

When the Miss Endicotts had been with their uncle and aunt, an invitation had come for the whole party to spend a day on board a yacht in order to follow the fortunes of a popular regatta. The invitation had been at once declined for the girls by their aunt, with the private explanation to their uncle which the sisters understood without being told.

'They have got no suitable dress; we are not to rig them out afresh for the sake of one day's amusement. You and I will go, and the pair can be company for each other till we come back.'

Lucy hung her head and submitted to the deprivation, which was no joke to a girl fresh from school, though it was a small matter to her middle-aged aunt.

Celia preserved an unruffled front; the more so, no doubt, because she calmly foresaw the sequel.

In the course of the week which intervened between the invitation and its fulfilment, Celia so managed to assert herself and make the house unbearable for anybody who opposed her, that three days before the regatta the matron threw down her arms and told her husband she was going into the town to buy a proper dress for Celia.

'That girl will go with you to the Perrots' yacht,' she said decidedly, 'and I shall stay at home with her sister.'

'But why should you stay at home, if you thought of going?' inquired the astonished gentleman. 'And if one of the girls is to go—perhaps after all the affair is more in their line than in yours—why not both of them?'

'Because I cannot afford two costumes from the savings of all the house money which you give me,' said his wife sourly.

'Then if one of the two, why not poor little Lucy? I am sure she is much the more deserving of the holiday.'

'Because, if you will have it, I cannot stand another day of that girl Celia in her present temper. I would not remain alone with her for twelve hours, while you and Lucy have gone to enjoy *yourselves* without her, not for a pension!'

'But it is not right,' remonstrated the representative of John Bull, from a sense of outraged justice; 'it is rewarding the girl for her misconduct.'

'I know that,' owned his harassed wife, 'but I cannot help it. If that girl's father was like what she is, I should be loth to blame your miserable sister for doing anything she could to get out of his clutches!'

So Celia had her day's holiday and the yachting costume, while Lucy went without because she was well-disposed and harmless.

In addition to the yachting costume, Celia had the stock of finery which she had been so expeditious in laying in at Ashford. From her own wealth she would have been willing to offer, in an insolently patronising fashion, a sash or a fichu, a pair of spare fresh gloves or a lace sunshade, to carry off Lucy's faded shabbiness. But Lucy had a little wounded spirit left which forced her to decline the fair show of generosity. Besides, she knew by hard experience what interest she would have to pay for it, how intolerable Celia could make life to those to whom she had granted a grace, with what strange perversity she would turn all at once and persecute those whom she had been seeming to favour. When Lucy rejected the compensation dangled within her reach Celia simply sat and laughed at her sister's mortification, and took the trouble to point out the inconvenient proximity of one of the few surviving galas—if it could be called a gala—of the moor. It was in a manner public property; it was held within a walking distance of Blackhall, and Jem Endicott had to do with it, so that his sisters need not if they chose be shut out. It was the annual dragging of Deveral Pool, so as to clear it from encroaching weed and rubbish for the rest of the season. Another object was to land the greatest catch of fish which could be found in its waters.

The dragging ought, by the right law of dragging, to have been done considerably later in the season, when all summer growth was over; but so cold was the normal temperature of the water in this region, that licence was granted to the dragger to do his work in the height of the summer. It was said no mortal man could have dragged Deveral Pool for a period of hours in September or October and escaped the consequences of his temerity. The only other country gathering which surpassed the pool-dragging in popularity was the pony drift, for that part of the moor where all the ponies pasturing within certain limits, and the foals bred there, were driven by their owners and the moormen into an enclosure resembling a Scotch *fank* for sheep, and branded afresh for the year.

Both entertainments were purely local and smelt of the shop, as Celia said; still, in the dearth of other public doings and merry-makings, these two were not to be despised, particularly when they were attended by all the visitors and the country

people from far and near, so that on each occasion there was at least a small crowd to laugh at and with, in contrast to the wonted solitude of the scene.

The dragging of Deveral Pool, though it was not a private boon – being, in fact, a service done to the community, free to fish in the water or row on it—fell as a duty to the squire of Blackhall, on whose property the pool was situated. At the same time it was a necessity of the task that the man who undertook it should be one of the strongest swimmers and the hardiest in enduring cold and wet in the district.

For a number of years the service had been rendered by Hugh Endicott himself, and before his purse was empty and his hearth desolate he had gratified his hankering after popularity by summoning all who would join him of rich, poor, young and old, to repair with him to Blackhall after his work was done, and feast ostensibly on the fish taken from the net and distributed among those who had any claim to the spoil, with a double portion to the dragger of the pool.

Jem Endicott had taken his father's place in later years, and dragged the pool so as to keep it sweet and wholesome—a place for fishers and rowers during the remaining months of the season —while he had omitted the subsequent dubious hospitality. Certainly nobody had expected it from him while he lived a clownish, poverty-stricken bachelor in a corner of the old house. The year before the present there had been a difficulty; the squire of Blackhall had been from home, on one of the solitary fishing excursions in which he indulged himself, about the usual time for the ceremony, and there seemed some danger of its being omitted. In that case the pool, as it was situated in a somewhat airless hollow in the middle of one of the oases of natural wood which diversified the bare expanse of the moor, ran a risk of getting choked up and becoming a dead sea of rotting vegetation. Then the parish and neighbourhood were electrified by the vicar's suddenly taking the vacant post, having received permission to do so from his parishioner Jem Endicott.

Perhaps Miles North had an irresistible longing to exercise his muscular Christianity in some other fashion than in traversing the wildest portions of the moor near Oxcleeve, at all hours, in his pastor's capacity. Perhaps he thought it might not be a bad thing to exhibit his physical strength and pluck in the eyes of a population with whom such gifts weighed heavily. It might not be quite so good in their eyes as to have joined in a famous day's hunt, kept up with the hounds and been in at the death, after he had put his neck in jeopardy a score of times on the roughest hunting-ground in England, which only the Rev. Jack Russell or Jack Thompson or Katerfelto's true master would have thought of using for such a purpose. But on the whole the dragging of Deveral Pool would better become the Rev.

Miles's cloth, and would render him, should the enterprise be repeated, less liable to be censured by his bishop.

Miles North did more than exhibit himself in boating flannels, wading, swimming, and dragging Deveral Pool in the presence of a concourse of spectators; he made the act an excuse for entertaining the poorer of his people, together with their richer brethren, at a substantial dinner laid out on a long table in the vicarage garden. The proceeding would have been still more appreciated and enjoyed if there had not been a prevailing feeling among the entertained that they were on 'parson's ground.' They could not use any freedom with their pale-faced grave young parson, who, though he was the right sort and good as gold, and though he tried to be social, did not have it in him, either in his bones or his skin. Therefore it behoved them to be on their best behaviour; and though such a dinner was gratifying and grateful to them, best behaviour was fatiguing, above all if it had been maintained for a period of hours.

As it happened, the vicar's dinner in honour of the dragging of the pool became awkward in the light of a precedent. This year Jem Endicott was at home, and would be sure to resent any proposal to appropriate his office—one of the few things left to him—while a dinner or supper from him to the people was not to be thought of. At the same time the absence of what the vicar felt too late had been the injudicious revival of an old custom would be peculiarly galling to the principal performer as a betrayal of the nakedness of the land, where he was concerned The Rev. Miles would willingly have done what he could to retrieve his blunder by giving the dinner while Jem Endicott dragged the pool—a division of responsibilities which, in spite of Tony's tricks, might have been conducive to the decorum of the company as well as to the excellence of the viands. But such a suggestion would be yet more offensive to the ruined squire.

In his annoyance the vicar chanced to mention the matter to Lady Jones, and she stepped in, like a good angel, at the crisis. To his surprise and gratification she found an unthought-of escape from the predicament.

'Let me entertain the company,' she pressed eagerly, 'if it will be any relief and help to Mr. Endicott, and of course to you. You have received me kindly, and I have done nothing—nothing in the world in return. I should not think of it for a moment,' she continued earnestly, with the least shade of agitation disturbing her tranquillity, causing her hands to shake a little as she clasped and unclasped them in her lap, and a degree of tremulousness to come into her voice, 'if it were a different kind of party. It would be taking too much upon me—I who have not the ghost of a right to do so, and have refused to enter into society. But if this is, as I understand it, principally a gathering of simple homely folk from the village here and the village next to it, and from outlying farms on the moor, a mixed

party of people who will not be particular with regard to whom they may meet any more than they would be in church, since they need never know each other afterwards, I think I might be allowed to do it.'

'My dear Lady Jones, why do you say "allowed"? You are only a great deal too good and willing to be of use. It is we natives or far longer settled residents here who ought not to accept such a favour at your hands. Think of the trouble and fatigue you would incur, the overturning of your whole establishment, the strain on your health, even if you did not mind the expense. Believe me I never thought of such a thing, and I should not listen to it for a moment.'

'But you see I have thought of it,' she said, with her quickly coming and going smile; 'and I am quite equal to it, I assure you. When we were up the country in Australia we had often to show hospitality on a large rough scale to shepherds and drovers and their families; of course they were our friends and neighbours, just as their masters were.'

'But you have not your Australian house and household here,' he reminded her.

'No, but my resources are greater than you think. The rooms in the Court are not large, but there is a number of them; while the accommodation outside—the offices which have been turned into laundry, box-room, and harness-room, can easily be cleared out and made available. The people at the "Furze Bush," Tom Carew's people, will help me, or I can send to Ashford for assistants. Perhaps you will let your housekeeper come over and make my servants profit by her experience. I could hire the large room at the "Furze Bush"; but I should like to have the people here, even though they had to be distributed in different rooms, since the Court belongs to the Blackhall family. The Court is really nearer Deveral Pool than Blackhall is, and much nearer than you must have found the vicarage, surely. It is not unnatural or unfit that I should entertain the village people, especially as I have been accustomed to such entertainments.' She spoke with a sudden assertion of dignity which made the puzzled vicar remember that she was the widow of a late governor of a considerable slice of Australia, and therefore really the person of highest rank in the place. But the next moment she was pleading with her frank humility and strain of eagerness as if for an undeserved privilege. 'You will let me do it, if it is to extricate anybody from a dilemma, if it is to save Jem Endicott, my landlord, from being exposed in his poverty and hurt in his pride.'

He did not know what to make of her, except that in the middle of her sedateness and sense she was full of impulsive good-will, lack of ceremony, and rash liberality. Why should she so glibly call her landlord, of whom she could know little or nothing, a young man so unlike her to boot, 'Jem Endicott'?

It might be a free and an easy colonial practice, but in a woman, a lady, it grated on his nice sense of what should be. He did not, after the fashion of Mrs. Reynolds, grudge Lady Jones's attentions to her landlord and his family; on the contrary, he was deeply grateful for them. He did not waver in his conviction that she was an excellent woman, superior in every way, a boon to him and his parish, but—he could not quite make her out.

Lady Jones had her will. It created no little surprise, some censure, and a good deal of jubilation.

Lucy Endicott's unhappiness on the great dress question culminated in view of the dragging of Deveral Pool, in which her brother Jem was to be the principal figure, and the collation at the Court, 'a ghastly affair,' as Celia and Tony North called it, at which anybody and everybody might be present, where Lucy had a notion, which might have been a happy one in other circumstances, that she would be very welcome.

Poor Lucy put an extraordinary value on fit and becoming clothes, though she neither would nor could have been guilty of Celia's mode of obtaining them. To Lucy, very shabby and inappropriate dress at any time was a positive degradation. It pained and shamed her, as Lady Jones, for instance, would not have been shamed, though she had been called on by a social revolution to walk abroad in Sally Beaver's canvas apron and sun-bonnet—according to Celia's graphic picture of what might be in store for her and Lucy. Lady Jones would have publicly worn a working woman's clothes with a certain quiet submission and simple unconsciousness which would have changed their character. But the same philosophy was impossible for Lucy, especially where the case was not obligatory, where she might stay at home instead of going abroad. And the question was not of Sally Beaver's unvarnished homespun, but of Lucy's worn-out girlish finery. She would sooner stay at home, dreary and full of trouble as that home was for her, much as she pined and longed for a change, for something to brighten the dulness and monotony of her daily life, and to make her forget the distress and fear into which some of Celia's escapades plunged her sister. It would have been the next thing to impossible to make Lucy comprehend that it was she and not her clothes which would derive any profit from the performance at Deveral Pool, and that particularly with regard to Lady Jones it would be Lucy whom the lady would be glad to see, and not any suit Lucy might wear, though that suit had been composed of cloth of gold.

CHAPTER XIX.

NOTHING TO WEAR.

'I AM afraid I must give it up,' said Lucy disconsolately on returning from a last doleful inspection of the degenerated cashmere.

Celia was her sole audience; Sally Beaver had come into the room on some household errand in the middle of Lucy's lamentations, and had put in her word like an honest unconventional old Devonshire lass.

'Nay, now, Miss Lucy, you bean't a-thinking of ztopping at home from the play when the measter will drag the pool like his father afore him, as gin he wers a dragon or a giant, and a mort of folk looking on? You, his own zister, to bide away! Fie, for shame!'

'What business is it of yours, Sally Beaver, whether we go or stay?' Celia put down the speaker summarily. 'I have yet to learn that we are under your orders.'

'Beest right, zewer; you'll end under a harder measter yet, Miss Celia,' retorted Sally, indignant but undismayed; for was not the young squire himself her master, and the 'tew boarding-school misses' accidental accompaniments of the situation to whom she was kind at her will and pleasure?

'Oh! thanks, Sally, but I must do what I think is right; I must give it up,' cried Lucy, anxious to smooth Celia's ruffled plumes, and with her own grievance not rendered less by the passing skirmish between Celia and Sally.

Strife to Celia was like water to a duck; even when she did not absolutely enjoy it the natural element ran off her, as it were, without injuring her. But to Lucy strife was hateful—a rough wind which shook, tossed, and tore at her, from which she would fain have flown away like king David's dove, and been at rest.

'Why don't you go into Ashford and buy something fit to wear?' suggested Celia cheerfully, after Sally had left the room.

Celia was not lolling back in her chair on this occasion. She had a fit of industry upon her. When these fits occurred they proved beyond doubt what Celia could have done if she had liked, Lucy said with half-envious admiration. But when Celia sat upright, her white fingers holding the needle which flew in and out of the cloth, it was never for such small domestic service as Lucy sought to render to the family sitting-room in her fiddle-faddle mats and cushions. Celia's exertions were made solely and unblushingly on her own behalf, as at the present moment, when she was engaged with a supply of elaborate frilling for

her personal adornment. Lucy had once mildly hinted, 'Oh, Celia! you work so fast and so well; if you would help me, we might embroider a portière and perhaps mantelpiece curtains such as we saw at Teignmouth. It would be such an improvement to this room.'

'Nonsense, child!' answered Celia, 'trash of slop worsted work, out of date already, dragged into all manner of shapes in the working and disposed awry by an amateur upholstress, would not improve a place which is like a room in a third-rate farmhouse. When I have anything to do with work it must be irreproachable work of its kind. Besides, my labour and toil would lead to nothing. This is Jem's house. If it were mine, or if I meant to stay in it an hour longer than I could help, it might be different.'

'What do you mean to do?' inquired Lucy, puzzled.

'Nothing,' she said lightly. 'There is nothing that I know of to be done, save bide my time. Still, in the circumstances, I can afford to be supremely indifferent to the fact that, so far from giving us satin and velvet with silks and gold thread—which, by-the-bye, would look very funny here—to work with, Jem would grudge the very needles and thimbles that might be worn out in the undertaking.'

Yet Celia had within this moment advised Lucy to go into Ashford and get fresh clothes at Jem's expense for the dragging of Deveral Pool and Lady Jones's party.

'How can I, Celia?' objected Lucy, opening her baby blue eyes and speaking in accents of plaintive reproach. 'I'm sure *you* know very well I can't.'

'Well, I don't say Bliss is worth much,' answered Celia deliberately, while a pair of scissors with which she was clipping flashed here and there like lightning over her work, 'but for a small, easily pleased mind like yours I thought he might do the little job. Is it London or Paris shops you are sighing after, my dear?'

'Celia, you must know very well it is not Bliss's. He struck me as having quite a good shop for a country town.'

'Let me avail myself of her vast and cosmopolitan experience,' interrupted Celia in a mock aside. 'I believe she is intimately acquainted with what colours and stuffs are the fashion this year in Teheran and Ispahan.'

'Don't tease,' besought Lucy; 'it is easy for you to sit and make game of me, but it is not so easy for me to bear it when I am put out, at any rate. I have not been anywhere for an age—well, except that one little drive with Lady Jones.' She made the exception hurriedly—partly because Lucy was a conscientious young woman according to her light, else she would not have made it at all; partly because she did not wish Celia to ask questions about the drive. It had happened by the merest accident, and Celia was supposed to know nothing of the en-

counter with the vicar and the visit in his company to his school, but she had not failed to resent the liberty.

'Oh yes,' said Celia, composedly lifting up her eyes from her work and fixing them on Lucy, 'and in the course of the drive there was that fine fuss of examining the village school sewing class, and then the tea-drinking with the daughter of the inn-keeper of the "Furze Bush"—a remarkably dignified proceeding.'

'How did you know?' asked Lucy, with a gasp of amazement and dismay.

'Never mind how I knew,' said Celia, nodding triumphantly, put in high good-humour at thus being enabled to prove her ubiquity; 'only I warn you that you can do very little without my knowing it.' Celia prided herself on being acquainted with everything that passed around her—little as she cared for what did not concern herself. Especially what Jem or Lucy did was not to be suffered to escape her. As a matter of fact, Celia had a marvellous faculty for worming out anything kept hidden from her.

'Naturally I should like to see Jem dragging the pool,' sighed Lucy, hastening to change the subject by reverting to her own grievance. 'I should like to go afterwards and see all the country people at the Court, and help Lady Jones if she wished help. I am sure there is no harm in that,' repeated poor Lucy, with a note in her voice that sounded like her mother's querulousness before Mrs. Endicott had been driven into scandalous rebellion and then cowed into blank apathy and blind terror.

'None in the world. Has the parson been rating you for earthly-mindedness, that you put such a saintly question?'

'You know it is Jem,' cried Lucy, precipitately.

'Jem! What has Jem got to do with it?' asked Celia, with the best feigned astonishment.

'Why, Celia, what are you thinking of?' protested Lucy, tripping into the snare with such celerity that, as Celia complained to her chum and gossip, there was neither amusement nor credit to be got from making a fool of Lucy. 'Of course, Jem has to keep us in everything, our clothes as well as the rest.'

'Of course,' said Celia coolly; 'and did not Jem say in the grandest, though I must own it was not in the most gracious manner, "Get what you want, and I'll pay for it"?' (Celia mimicked Jem's gruff tones to the life.) 'Jem has a sense of common decency, I hope. He does not propose that we should go about like Greek statues or Adam and Eve before the Fall. The climate, if nothing else, would be against that easy way of meeting the difficulty. And he did not, though he has sheep and oxen on his brain, hint at their skins and hides. Oh! we are much more sophisticated than our early progenitors. No, he said as plainly as man could say—perhaps, between you and

ne, more plainly than politely—"Get what you want, and I'll pay for it." Could a man and a brother have said more?'

'Yes,' said Lucy, exasperated out of her passiveness, 'and you went and got lots of things which you did not want, and left me to do without.'

'The more fool you. And oh the injustice and unreasonableness of women! I did want the things, else why should I have bought them? I obeyed Jem literally, and, observe, I am reaping the fruits of my obedience. More than that, I told a little goose of a sister of mine to go and do likewise. I enlightened your ignorance in reference to the truism that, when Jem got the bill to pay, it would not signify what length it was; it would always seem long to him, however short it might be. What did he understand as to what girls wanted? A few interesting items more or less would not count. But you were always—will you forgive me for saying so, Lucy?—the most self-willed, thorough-paced donkey,' Celia ended, still in the greatest good-humour. When it came to that it was generally Lucy whose composure was overthrown by these discussions.

'I don't know what the difference is between a thorough-paced donkey and any other donkey,' said Lucy impatiently. 'Perhaps Mr. Tony North can tell, for I think it is one of his pet expressions which you have borrowed.'

'I dare say,' answered Celia carelessly.

'But I do know that I would not go on as you do, Celia, not to be a hundred times better dressed than I am—than you are with the whole world holiday; and it is not true,' went on Lucy in passionate denial, 'that it does not signify what we buy at a shop, leaving Jem to pay. He was very, very angry when he got the account, and all his anger was put out on poor me;' and Lucy wept for her ill-used self.

'After he said "Get what you want, and I'll pay for it," the faithless monster! But after all, I suppose, he did pay for it, or he is going to, which comes to much the same thing, and in the meantime Bliss has our custom. Jem did not promise not to take the mean advantage of flying into a rage and abusing us for being dependent on him. Well, go on, Lucy; he was very angry; what then?'

'He said he should have to sell Blackhall and leave the country. Oh, poor Jem!' cried Lucy, with a fresh burst of tears, which was not all for herself this time; 'and that we should have to starve or go into the poor-house, I forget which; I know it was something dreadful.'

'Tolerably disagreeable, at least; was there no alternative?'

'I told you at the time,' Lucy remonstrated, and then proceeded infatuatedly to tell the story over again, as she was bidden. 'He said he believed we had got enough clothes to last us all our lives. Instead of that I have not a frock except this,' touching a serge decidedly the worse of the wear, 'and that old

cashmere, and the grenadine I used to wear for an evening dress. My best boots are nearly done; they are all scraped at the heels, and the tags and button-holes will fringe out though I have worked them all over again, in spite of the leather making my finger so sore. I cannot tell what I am to do for a warm jacket when the cold weather comes.'

'Oh, never mind the cold weather, it is not come yet; and do leave off making an inventory of your effects; they don't sound imposing, I assure you. But didn't he say something more?'

'He said that if we had to get anything again we were to tell him first,' was further wrung from the reluctant Lucy.

'And then?' persisted the relentless tormentor, with her dark eyes glittering.

'Then—but why do you ask me when you know all about it as well as I do? Then when I had to get some little things for the house and for myself, and wished to mention them to Jem, he was quite indignant. He said, was he to be troubled about such wretched trifles when he had enough to think of? If I could not arrange about them without coming to him I ought to be sent back to school again, only school was too advanced for me—I should not be out of the nursery. Why do you laugh, Celia? How can you be so unkind?

Celia was laughing immoderately. 'You took your revenge, though you have not the wit to see it, and you have slurred over the story shamefully. Confess you went to Jem and said, "Jem dear, may I have a couple of yards of ticking, and a pennyworth of dishclout, and two pieces of tape, and a dozen hooks and eyes?"'

'No, I did not,' said Lucy doggedly.

'Well, whether you did or not literally, you are freed from the risk of an accusation that you have neglected his absurd instructions. You are delivered from the obligation of attempting to comply with them in future. You are thrown back on his former comprehensive formula. For, as I said before, Jem is a respectable young man, though he frequents the "Furze Bush." He goes to church and waits on our admirable vicar's ministry of a Sunday morning very much as we do. He does not intend us to go about in England on the edge of a moor like Hottentots or South Sea Islanders in the torrid zone—if, indeed, these pets of missionaries still dispense with superfluous drapery.'

'Do you really think Jem means me after all to get what I want without more ado?' inquired Lucy wistfully, beginning to waver, and with a ray of hope breaking in upon her dejection.

'What should he mean if not that?' said Celia, with her mocking laugh.

'Because, if you really think so, the stuff I had in my mind, the cream-coloured nun's veiling, is so cheap; it hardly costs

more than the calico—not ticking—I had to get a fortnight ago. I should not think of giving the material to Mrs. Denny to make up. I should unpick the poor cashmere and copy it the best way I could in my own room—though, unless it were for Sally's seeing what I was about,' said Lucy mysteriously, as if she were planning a murder, 'I might work at it down here without anybody's being the wiser. I suppose neither you nor Jem would mind much?'

'I beg your pardon,' said Celia decidedly, and with hauteur, 'I should mind very much. I don't choose to live in a dressmaker's workroom.' She had odd, fitful notions of dignity and decorum in the middle of her recklessness and defiance of social proprieties. 'However, you may settle about that afterwards. As I should rather like a long walk, I don't mind going over with you to Ashford to-morrow, and giving you the benefit of my advice in your shopping—in choosing the plush or satin, or whatever it is to be.'

'Oh no, Celia, you know nothing *would* tempt me to buy anything save the very cheapest material a lady can wear. Fortunately, when one is a young, unmarried lady, and the season is summer,' added Lucy, growing self-conscious and sententious in one breath, 'almost anything will do, so that it is fresh and the colour is good and suitable to the wearer's complexion.'

'Certainly; and when one happens to have yellow hair, and skin like cheese-curd, with pink cheeks—though the pinkness is a little apt to go into the nose when its owner cries—almost any colour suits the complexion.'

'I did not mean to undervalue your hair and complexion,' said Lucy, with single-hearted self-reproach; 'though cream-colour does not go well with them, so many other colours do—splendidly. I shall be very much obliged to you for your company to Ashford, and your opinion in the shop. I should like so much to see Jem drag Delaval Pool and to go to the Court with the rest, and have a new frock, of which I am in great need. Only, Celia, you are sure—you are quite sure that is what Jem meant at the bottom of his heart, just to get what I want and say no more about it?'

'Sure!' echoed Celia, emphasising the word; 'is sure not enough? Would "as sure as the day of judgment" be better?'

'Oh, no!' cried Lucy in dismay. 'Such an awful expression to come out of a young lady's mouth! What would Miss Penfold have thought?'

'What, indeed? But, as I never cared what she thought when I was theoretically under her care, it is not likely that I should mind now.'

'I do hope Bliss and his shop people will be civil,' said Lucy, a little nervously. 'I can tell you the last time I was there they were not quite—quite respectful.'

'All your imagination or your own fault, my dear. You ought to carry matters with a high hand. Nobody is ever uncivil to me.'

'No, I declare they are not,' said Lucy wonderingly, 'though I am sure you try them a great deal more than I do; and, in the case of Jem, you don't strive half so hard to please him.'

'I don't strive at all. I should never think of such a thing.'

'Yet Jem does not scold you as he scolds me sometimes,' said Lucy, drooping her head.

'Jem knows whom he may scold, and the world knows it too. Shall I give you my recipe gratis? If you can't make people love you, and I don't see the great gain supposing you could—very inconvenient often, I should say—people who think they love you are always expecting something you do not have to give them in return, and whining and whimpering because they do not get it—a pinch of fear does a great deal better. A wholesome dread of what you may say or do next is a very available weapon to carry you through the world.'

Lucy was not listening attentively. 'I say, Celia,' she exclaimed quickly and a little shamefacedly, 'to-morrow is market day, and Jem will very likely be at Ashford.'

'I don't see that it matters,' said Celia indifferently; 'but if you would rather that he had not the pleasure of looking at you going into Bliss's, lest he should feel in the humour to walk in after you, inspect your purchases, and fall foul of you before the linendraper and his counter-jumpers, let us walk over this afternoon.'

'Thanks,' said Lucy, absently and uneasily. 'It is very good of you; but can it be right to be so frightened for meeting Jem?'

Celia made a grimace of utter weariness and disgust; then she put herself to the trouble of explaining, 'If I am not frightened for meeting Jem on all occasions, it is because fright is a question of constitution and temperament. He ought not to be such a boor and bully—when people are stupid enough to submit to be bullied by him.'

'It would be such a relief,' said Lucy, plaintive again, 'and I might get enough material to make a hat like my frock—luckily they can be worn of the same stuff. It is ridiculously inexpensive when one can cover an old hat. I thought Lady Jones looked at my straw hat the other day, where the sun, with the want of shade on the moor, has so burnt the straw and faded the riband that I could not go out in it if it were not partly hidden by my veil.'

As Lucy recalled Lady Jones's covert look, in which there was a mixture of ruefulness and wistfulness, a bright idea flashed across the girl's mind. 'Oh, Celia, I have thought of something!' she cried eagerly, 'something that might be far better and safer than running up more debt, which Jem may be called on to pay any day. If I got just a few things, I could

manage for the next month or two. Lady Jones seems such a rich woman, as if she did not know what to do with her money, and I am certain she is very good and kind. She asked me, *âpropos* of some talk we had about birthday cards and presents, and Christmas and Easter cards and gifts—when I am afraid she found out that I did not get very many—if I wished some particular thing of the kind very much, would I let her know just before Christmas or my birthday, for she had not great experience in these things? I did not tell you before, because, of course, I took her speech as half in jest, though she said it as if she were very much in earnest, and almost as if she were asking a favour. But I had no intention of telling her anything of the sort, since she is only Jem's tenant and no relation of ours, not even an old friend. However, I do believe she would not mind lending me a little money for a short time. I could ask it from Jem when he was not so worried and pressed, and pay her back; or, if he could not give it to me—and I must have clothes, you know—and she required it sooner, she might keep it off the rent of the Court, so that she could not by any chance be a loser. But, if you think I ought not to go so far as to borrow from her, may not I just take her into my confidence, as it were, and tell her how pinched we are, and how much in need I am of some things? Only to say so would not be borrowing, would it?' asked Lucy, with simple cunning, at the same time drawing back before the change in her sister's face.

'Lucy, are you mad?' cried Celia indignantly, 'to go borrowing and begging from a stranger, a woman nobody knows anything about? You would drive Jem out of his senses. Lady Jones would never speak to you or to any of us again, and no wonder; she would give up the Court on the first opportunity. She would tell that detestable harpy Mrs. Reynolds; it would be all over the place presently. You are so silly; you are not fit to be trusted alone with anybody. It was all very well for Lady Jones to amuse herself with getting all she could out of you and sneering at our poverty, but you ought not to have allowed it.'

'She never did, Celia,' protested Lucy, writhing under the reproaches heaped upon her.

'And then,' went on Celia, paying no heed to the protest, 'to treat you like a child, bidding you tell her what you wished for most! I wonder she did not give you the benefit of three wishes when she was about it, according to the old approved plan,' the speaker broke off to exclaim with high disdain. 'And who was to grant your wish, pray? a fairy god mother? or, as Christmas was mentioned, Santa Claus might have been lugged in. Oh, Lucy! you twenty, and consenting to be treated like a baby—an idiot!'

Lucy was crying again with sheer mortification and disappointment. 'I shall not say anything to Lady Jones if you

think I ought not; but you need not say that she was taking me off and insulting me, for that is not true. I am certain she is a kind, good woman, and thought only of making me happy, as not many people think.'

'Don't be a simpleton. Am I not going with you to Ashford this very afternoon on purpose to help you?'

Lucy could no longer resist her sister's influence and her own inclinations. The sisters walked over to Ashford together. Celia browbeat the tradesmen and talked over Lucy into having gloves and neckties and ribands as well as shoes. She made her take material for a frock twice as expensive as Lucy had intended to get. When she was having a dress which she did not have every day, it was poor economy, assured Celia her sister, to grudge a little more a yard. It was a mistake to buy what was not worth making up. Then, when she had got a tolerable article, it was utter waste as well as loss of caste to think of being her own dressmaker. Mrs. Denny was only a county town dressmaker, still she was a tradeswoman by nature and training. She 'made for the county,' as she would tell you, and, *faute de mieux*, she could manage the little matter. Celia went over the stereotyped specious arguments with much force and impressiveness. As a suitable wind-up to the business, she suggested to Lucy—who blindly followed the suggestion with a vague idea, partly that it was relieving Jem of the burden, partly that it was furnishing her with time to explain everything to him—that the mystified Bliss should make out the account in her own name and apply to her for the payment. Thus Lucy was well started in a career of independent personal debt, with no conceivable motive on Celia's part for leading her into the snare, unless the love of controlling her sister, the desire to make her look a little worse than herself in Jem's eyes, and the determination to keep every other person, especially Lady Jones, with regard to whom Celia had a marked dislike and distrust, from gaining any hold over Lucy.

As for Lucy herself, by the time the Rubicon was passed she could think of nothing but her new pretty frock and of the contrast which her appearance would present when she came out in it to her looks in the despised and superseded cashmere. And would *he* notice the difference? Of course, *he* was immeasurably removed from such perishing vanities. It was almost profanation to think of him and them in the same breath. But she could not be altogether deluded. She was not so forward and vain, so unmaidenly, though Celia said she had no wits, as to imagine without a particle of cause that she, Lucy, had found favour in the wise eyes which were yet so frequently and persistently turned away from her. She knew nothing would or could come of it. In her abashed humility she hardly wished anything should come of it, for his sake. It was with her as with Shakespeare's Helena; it were as well that she

should love a bright particular star, and think to wed it; the very idea was enough to drag down the star from its native heavens. He was so good, so clever, so much thought of; a clergyman—the best of clergymen, with his past and all about him open, fair, and honourable, as a gentleman's, above all a clergyman's, antecedents should be. She was so foolish, as Celia said; so weak, as she herself knew too well; in such straits; with relatives so unsatisfactory as Jem and Celia in the foreground, and with far darker shadows over her kindred and their history in the background. How unfit in every respect she was to be a clergyman's wife, even if he could be so far left to himself as to wish it! She would be a drag upon him and a disgrace to him, instead of a help and an honour. She could never be so bold and selfish as to think for a moment of such a *mésalliance* for him. But still, might she not be allowed to show herself to advantage in his company? Might she not be suffered to sun herself in his presence, in the sense of his approval during one of the few opportunities they had of meeting? Her enjoyments were scanty and impaired to her by drawbacks which she had not created and could not demolish. She did not believe that she would have to pay a very high price for this one, because, however foolish she might be, her eyes had been open from the beginning to the impossibility of anything coming of it, and she expected nothing.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DRAGGING OF DELAVAL POOL.

'My dear creature,' cried Mrs. Reynolds in animated remonstrance with Lady Jones on her decision, 'what has put this nonsense into your head? Why did you not speak to me before you took such a step? Our dear, good, guileless vicar or those mendacious Endicotts must have talked you over. You, who have declined to avail yourself of the privilege I was willing to put within your power of entering our charming little circle of county society, to propose to wear yourself out by giving an entertainment to all the riff-raff of the village and neighbourhood! It is not at all in your way.'

'It is not so far removed from some of our Australian ways, I am glad to say. I am able for it and I wish it. It was entirely my own doing, my own proposal,' said Lady Jones, in her even unanswerable tones. 'You are utterly mistaken in supposing that anybody persuaded me to give a dinner to my poorer neighbours on the occasion of the dragging of Delaval Pool. Nobody so much as hinted at such a thing. The idea was even

strenuously opposed. 'But,' she added, with one of her softened smiles, '"a wilful woman will have her way."'

'Then you must make up your mind to my inviting myself,' said the unrebuffed visitor. 'I cannot allow you to go through such an ordeal unsupported; and you must let me bring my sister and brother from Barnes Clyffe. You cannot refuse, and propose to shut them out any longer when you admit all the rag-tag and bob-tail. The Barneses have been long dying to make your acquaintance, you exclusive, eccentrically hospitable woman.' The speaker poked Lady Jones with a large finger. There was method under Mrs. Reynolds's heavy jokes; neither was the volunteering to bring Mr. and Mrs. Barnes in her wake a sudden, inconsistent concession. It was rather a piece of nice calculation. 'If Emily will only be careful, it need not compromise her a bit to come to the Court with the Clan Jamfrey. They are not expected to keep up the acquaintance. Lady Jones will not return their calls, neither need it be the case with the Barnes Clyffe people. Emily will see all she wants to see in a general informal way, and think no more of Lady Jones. And my sister and Gregory Barnes need not blame me for the introduction—should she ever have occasion to regret it. As it is, she is so imprudent, inquisitive, and undignified, so inclined to pretend either that my services are of no use, or that I wish to keep my friend to myself, that I am constantly expecting Emily to do something desperate, such as driving over and leaving her card and her husband's at the Court without so much as letting me know her intention, though I have told her over and over again that Lady Jones declines visiting.'

Lady Jones was more put out by the threatened invasion of the Barneses than by anything which had gone before it. She stood hesitating, colouring high, and muttering what sounded meaningless phrases of gratification and gratitude. She had not counted on entertaining such guests with the others; she—she was afraid she could not do it. She could not make it pleasant for them. Mr. and Mrs. Barnes might regret having come.

Mrs. Reynolds could not make her friend out. She had no resource save to refuse to see what it was not convenient for her to see, and to take refuge in clearing away in a general, indefinite manner what she could take for granted might be some of Lady Jones's scruples. 'Do not say another word. Do not put yourself about, I beseech you. What will do for the commonalty will do quite well for us gentlefolks. We should be dreadfully distressed if we suspected you of making any change in your arrangements on our account. My sister is the easiest going of mortals—only too much so, and Gregory Barnes is ridiculously homely in his tastes and ways for a well-born, wealthy squire. But he is a gentleman, though a rough one, else nobody connected with me would have had anything to say to him, I need not say. I hope, dear Lady Jones, that you are not prejudiced against Mr.

Barnes because he does not go to church. Of course, it is lamentably lax and improper—a great grief to us all. I cannot bear to look Mr. North in the face when I think of it. Yet I am thankful to say there is not a word against Gregory Barnes's moral character. My poor dear sister is much to be felt for, as it is; I often tell her so; but it would be too scandalous, too hideous a fall, for one of my father's daughters if Mr. Barnes were a drunkard or a profligate.'

Lady Jones interrupted her companion, not only with the unceremonious plain speaking in which she sometimes indulged, but with startling severity.

'How can you say such things, Mrs. Reynolds? I never heard a word breathed against Gregory Barnes. He is a good, honest gentleman; and I have no doubt that what he is, his wife, and all belonging to him, are people whom any woman might be proud to see in her house—that is, if she sought to receive such as they, who might reasonably object to finding themselves among company that had not been so blameless and so favoured.'

'Not at all,' said Mrs. Reynolds boldly. She was thoroughly mystified, but she could not at that moment afford to be offended or to entertain doubts; besides, she had not recovered from her surprise—she was still a little flurried. 'My sister and brother-in-law are only too accessible, and not particular enough, according to my opinion, in drawing the line; above all, where there are girls in the family.'

Lady Jones showed herself inclined to keep up her righteous indignation at any implied attack on Gregory Barnes. This was conduct on her part which Mrs. Reynolds characterised afterwards as like that of a lunatic, seeing that his champion had never spoken to the assailed man, and that his supposed assailant was his wife's sister, who might surely be accredited with taking the best view of him in Mrs. Barnes's interest and her own.

'You ought to be proud of having anything to do with him,' cried the impetuous, pale-faced, white-haired woman. 'He is come of an old Devonshire stock, with all their virtues and none of their vices. He began life in the old wild days, and he was a man amongst men; but, as I said, the most reckless tongue never dared wag against him. And he is not a freethinker, as you seem to imply, although he does not go to church. I hold it is the very essence of Protestantism that a man should be left to think for himself on the most momentous of topics. I have heard that he knew men filling churches in his youth who would have turned any truthful, pure-minded, reverent man from the church. If ever man was justified in such circumstances in becoming a priest to himself and his household, it was Gregory Barnes. Mr. North would be narrow-minded indeed—I should lose all my *good opinion* of him—if he could not make allowance *and recognise that* the sins which drove Gregory Barnes from

the Church were sins for which others, and not he, were responsible.'

'Mr. Barnes is greatly obliged to you,' said his sister-in-law, more mincingly than cordially; 'but I am afraid he takes a great, an unwarrantable, I may say a profane liberty, and that you yourself are—excuse me, dear Lady Jones—well, not so orthodox as I could wish you to be. You have been in the colonies knocking about, and no doubt exposed to contact with many kinds of creeds.' Mrs. Reynolds spoke of different creeds with a little recoil, very much as if they were infectious diseases. She assumed also a tone of forbearing superiority. 'It has been quite otherwise with me and my sister. We had the inestimable advantage of being brought up under the roof of a dignitary of the Church worthy of the name. Our religious principles and practices were jealously guarded from the time we could attend a service or repeat a collect. But since you approve so highly of my brother-in-law'—Mrs. Reynolds suddenly broke off her serious reflections and resumed the conversation in her ponderously light vein—'you may do him the honour of letting him take the head or the foot of your principal table at this odd house-warming.'

'No,' said Lady Jones, more gently. 'If my landlord, who is to drag the pool, does not take the place which is his by right, the vicar has promised to preside; a clergyman goes everywhere, and is never out of keeping. Besides, you know he gave a similar party last year. As Mr. and Mrs. Barnes have invited themselves through you, of course I can only thank them and be pleased to make them welcome;' and so the matter dropped.

The day for the dragging of Delaval Pool was auspicious, inasmuch as it was fair; but it was a raw day, cloudy, and with a biting east wind sandwiched between the summer days which had gone before and were to come after it. The unseasonable severity of the weather did not prevent the whole inhabitants of Oxcleeve and the country people from considerable distances who could take a day's holiday, together with the straggling visitors always on the alert for something novel and amusing, assembling. They came to witness Jem Endicott's feat in the first instance, and, in the second, to avail themselves of the hospitality of Lady Jones, who was throwing open her house to the public.

The muster-place was, according to taste, either on the edge of the pool, or midway up the wooded banks which surrounded it, or on the crest of the rising ground where there was the best view of all—for the pool wound a little.

Delaval Pool was of no great extent, neither broad nor long, if one measured it in reference to the adjoining land; but, by the two deep bends which it made, it commanded a greater amount of surface than might have been guessed at a single glance. Its depth varied greatly, and it was furnished with a few pools

within the pool, which, according to popular repute, were bottomless. It had to be navigated even in a rowing boat with some caution. For a man to wade it breast high, swimming whenever he got beyond his depth, with a net slung round his waist, which he was bound to drag in a long slant from one side of the pool to the other and back again, so as to take in every inch of the water and leave no part undragged, demanded an intimate acquaintance with the ground, and was a performance requiring both strength and skill. To do it in a day of cutting wind like the present, even though the pool was comparatively sheltered, asked imperatively for a strong constitution and great powers of physical endurance. Jem Endicott had seen his father do the same thing many a time when he, Jem, was a boy, and had helped Hugh Endicott by going into the water in his boating flannels as far as a boy could keep his feet, 'easing' the net and freeing it from any slight entanglement. Jem knew the pool from end to end, and so could calculate accurately both shoals and currents. But for Miles North, having a much more superficial familiarity with the spot and the service required, it had been an enterprise attended with greater risk. He had accomplished it successfully; but he was sufficiently impressed by the difficulties he had surmounted to induce him to appear again, to Jem's disgust, in boating flannels. The vicar was ready to step into the water to the dragger's assistance at any moment, though the hero of the hour, under his heavy brows, looked askance at the polite attention.

In general Delaval Pool, out on the moor, in its wooded socket, with its thick fringe of willows and ash trees like an eye heavily lashed, was sufficiently lonely to make it apparent why any girl's letting a man row her there for entire afternoons, especially any girl in the debatable position of the Endicotts, with such an escort as Tony North, exposed herself to grave censure.

But to-day the pool reflected many a face and figure among the little crowd on its shore, and echoed many a voice from the more distant spectators sheltering themselves among the trees on its banks or perched on the edge of the socket where the trees met heather, furze, and bracken, and the stony rocks—the great territory of oxen, sheep, and ponies.

In the prospect of Lady Jones's entertainment, as if they were qualifying themselves for rest and refreshment, many working women as well as men, in their Sunday's best, or in the unvarnished simplicity of Sally Beaver's canvas apron and sun-bonnet, with a child at the apron-string and another in the mother's arms, were looking on at the spectacle which the gazers had witnessed most years with undiminished zest since they themselves were the children. Another set of lookers on were the shepherds who could leave their sheep and the herdsmen who were not wanted for their cattle, but who had brought their

huge, earnest-minded, hoary-headed sheep-dogs with them in case of accident. There were also the claimants from time immemorial of their share of the fish when the nets should be finally emptied, the farmers of this and that small outlying farm, in tongues of half-reclaimed land projecting towards the pool, the widows of former farmers who held on by their late husbands' prerogatives, together with the poor of the district, the churchwarden for the poor of the parish, &c.

Strangers and members of the better classes looked on doubtfully at the squire of Blackhall publicly constituting himself the scavenger of Delaval Pool, though the Rev. Miles North had taken the service last year, and it was agreed that the work ought to be done for the good of everybody who chose to row on the pool or fish in its waters.

Jem passed muster better in the hunting-field, where he only amused himself in a fashion not quite consistent with his wrecked fortunes. There his safety lay in numbers. Here there was too much isolation and too many associations linked with 'the old ruffian, Hugh Endicott,' as many people called him, almost within earshot of his son and daughters.

When the company were tired of staring at the somewhat monotonous performance, they turned and stared with one accord at Lady Jones, who was so lavish with her means as to take it upon her to give the country people a feast. For she had nothing to do with the annual dragging of Delaval Pool or with the Endicotts, whose hereditary task it was, unless, to be sure, that she had the misfortune to be the tenant of an impecunious, embittered man like Endicott. Lady Jones had driven her little pony-phaeton round by the crest of the moor, and there she sat as lonely as Jem dragging the leaden-hued water below—a solitary figure to represent the woman who was giving the entertainment of the day. People remarked it was strange that both of the principal actors in the scene should be thus isolated in their pre-eminence. 'Look at thick man and thick woman,' marvelled some of the old gossips, 'them be o' t'other zide from their kind, as they're a-zweating and a-zpending for.'

Lady Jones did not appear to fail in sympathy with the object of the gathering. She sat looking fixedly at Jem's stalwart figure slowly breasting the water, now and then raising her head as if to take in the whole surroundings—the crowd, more or less excited and noisy, spreading up the banks, the shaggy background of moor, the curious effect of the sun's coming out in a somewhat lowering sky and sending its rays of the colour of glittering steel, rather than of burnished gold, athwart the clouds. It was a sun which shepherds call 'a drawing-out sun,' licking up all the moisture it could find, to lodge it in its storehouses and give it back in sheets of rain before many days should pass.

Mrs. Reynolds waddled up the footpath among the trees to hail her friend, who was absent-minded and oblivious of the

effort which had been made to reach her. She offered no comment when Mrs. Reynolds was at the trouble of pointing out 'that girl, Celia Endicott, dressed like a fool in a yachting costume; where had she yachted in the state of the family finances? She was having the barefacedness to render herself conspicuous already, talking with Mr. Tony North. The two were evidently taking off their neighbours to their faces. Miss Celia Endicott might be a little more careful of drawing attention to herself, everything considered. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones. But when one came to think of it, it was not the impertinent minx, Celia, but the double-faced chit, Lucy—the picture of her wretched mother—who had been guilty of the most flagrant offence against common decorum—decency, one might say—in having been seen wandering about after nightfall with the vicar's cousin.'

'Where is Lucy?' asked Lady Jones, as if she woke up at the name. 'Is she here? I cannot see her.' She spoke sharply. She looked as if she were chilled to the bone and shivering in the cold wind. The next moment she drew forward a white fleecy wool shawl which she sometimes wore with her mourning to wrap round her.

'Don't you see her? There the silly girl is, close by the water. I do not wonder that you have not recognised her at a glance, in that light summer frock, which would do for evening wear. She is not half so sensibly dressed as her sister. Miss Lucy had better study the thermometer next time she goes out, or she may get her death of cold. I declare for all her pink cheeks her lips are as blue as her brother's.'

'She is far too lightly clad,' said Lady Jones hastily; 'as you say, she will catch cold. I must get some one to run down to her with this shawl;' and she pulled off the wrap she had just drawn round her own shoulders.

'Oh dear no, don't think of such a thing; it is no business of yours.' Mrs. Reynolds tried in vain to prevent the transfer. 'I should leave her to bear the consequences of her folly; it might be a good lesson to her in future. What are you to do without your shawl? you want it for yourself. Indeed, you are absurdly soft-hearted and generous. Your friends must take care of you if you will not look after yourself, but propose to strip yourself of your wrap for the first idiot of a girl who comes out on a moor, in an east wind, in a frock of a texture which might have suited a ball-room.'

'Thanks, I can take care of myself,' said Lady Jones indifferently. Then she added with a suspicion of malice, while she looked about for the messenger Mrs. Reynolds did not stir to procure, 'I have been accustomed to take care of myself. Most single women like you and me can do that very well.'

'Single women!' exclaimed Mrs. Reynolds, with a gasp. '*Why, to hear you talk*, people might suppose that we were a

pair of neglected spinsters. Nobody would have been more astonished and scandalised than my poor dear husband to find me classed with unprotected females—forlorn old maids, after I had been married fifteen years. And if it had not been my own fault, I might have been married a dozen years earlier, and a dozen times oftener. I never wanted an escort—I was never a single woman, I can tell you.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Lady Jones, conquering an almost irresistible inclination to laugh, though she was in no laughing humour, 'I was speaking for myself. And I ought to have told you that I have a waterproof by me in case it should rain, I can easily do without the shawl.—Here, Joe!' She had at last caught sight, at a few yards' distance, of the boy from the 'Furze Bush,' who served as her groom. 'Run down the bank for me with this shawl. I wish you to take it to Miss Lucy Endicott, the young lady in white standing a little in advance of the other people, looking back on the gentleman who is dragging the pool.'

'She will not know where it comes from; she will not put it on,' said Mrs. Reynolds, unable to keep from meddling in the middle of her displeasure.

But Joe sped on his errand, and, without much explanation from him, Lucy clearly guessed who was the sender of the shawl. She craned her neck to catch sight of the carriage-road on the edge of the moor, and when she distinguished the pony-carriage, with its occupant, gave a bright beaming look and a grateful nod in that direction. She shot round another glance, hurried and apprehensive, in search of Celia. At last she folded the shawl round her with evident satisfaction.

'The coolness of these girls!' murmured Mrs. Reynolds.

'Never mind,' said Lady Jones, with restored good-humour. 'I ought to beg your pardon for not inviting you to come and sit down beside me in my doll's equipage—it is a little like a goat's carriage, I must confess—but at least you can rest in it.' She glanced with some hesitation and alarm at the slight wicker-work structure and the diminutive stature of Gooseberry and Peascod when contemplated in relation to the extensive proportions of the living load she proposed to impose upon them.

But Mrs. Reynolds declined the venture—she, too, had recovered her equanimity. She was waiting for her relations the Barneses, who were following her, in order to introduce them to Lady Jones.

CHAPTER XXI.

GREG BARNES AND HIS BELONGINGS TOGETHER WITH THE TALK OF THE DAY.

MR. AND MRS. BARNES rounded the last intervening group of trees at that moment. She was large like her sister, but her husband was still larger. He was an old man, with a huge frame which dwarfed all other physiques, whether of men or women, in its vicinity. Miles North, who was tall and broad-shouldered, Jem Endicott, who was as big as his father had been, would have looked mere slips of lads by the side of Gregory Barnes. He was like one of the great weather-beaten tors when the sun was shining on it, so as to give it an air of rough benignity and good-will, as he stood there in his coarse Devonshire cloth coat and coloured necktie.

Mrs. Barnes's size was a laugh-and-grow-fat comely bulk. She had been a much handsomer woman than her sister in their younger days, and was still an excellent example of bountiful, cheery matronhood. Lady Jones had not seen Mrs. Barnes before, except when she was passing in her carriage. The tenant of the Court gave the great lady a searching glance, and said to herself, 'It was well that good old Greg Barnes had such a comfortable down pillow for his declining years.'

The Barneses were not alone; they had brought their two daughters, Milly and Nettie, about whose morals and manners their aunt was so deeply concerned. Milly and Nettie did not look as if they would be particularly grateful for her anxiety on their behalf. They were buxom, blooming, fearless girls—worthy daughters of a man who had been, in his day, one of the mightiest hunters on the moor. They had the passion for independence and adventure of healthy happy girlhood; they considered that if they wanted any protection or defence, their father and mother were perfectly able to supply it, without the girls being condemned to listen to the domineering lectures and egotistical maundering of their Aunt Adeline.

'So like Emily—not to say so like Greg Barnes—to bring these girls here,' Mrs. Reynolds was reflecting to herself in strong disapproval. 'Is it a thing for delicate-minded girls to look at a man in flannels hauling a net from end to end of a pool? It was nothing last year, when the vicar was the man; but this year, when it is Jem Endicott—a most undesirable person for the girls to know—with his sisters still more *hors de combat*, what can their father and mother be thinking of? Even Lady Jones may not turn out exactly a model for girls to study,

though she has a title and feasts the village. She is queer in many ways, and one never gets to know anything further about her. Of course, she cannot do me any harm; and Emily Barnes and her rough diamond of a husband might stand the encounter, even if it turned out that there was anything wrong—if Sir Benjamin went out originally as a convict, and reformed and made money, or kept what he had stolen—that is always what I am frightened for; one reads of such things in books. But to bring these girls, who are forward enough and hoydenish enough already! I can only say it is like their father and mother. Those much-praised fathers and mothers, who constantly get the credit of knowing what is best for their offspring, and of making any personal sacrifice to bring it about! Whereas, what would the Barnes girls do without me to tell them what is what?'

In the meantime the introductions between Lady Jones and the Barneses were passing off very well. 'Poor soul!' thought kindly Mrs. Barnes, 'how much she must have been tried to look so white as that! I wish Greg and I could do something for her. I am afraid Adeline only teases her sometimes; a striking-looking woman, too, but so shy.'

For Lady Jones hardly said a word; though what she did say was all right, and perfectly courteous, Mrs. Reynolds told herself with a sigh of relief.

'A weeper on a gravestone; but neither hiding her eyes, nor putting out a torch,' said Greg Barnes, not very respectfully. 'I did not think that would have been to Madam Reynolds's taste.'

But he had a better opinion of the stranger when George Fielding came up, and the two men took to discussing county matters, especially moor matters: all the pools which never went dry in summer, and never bore trustworthy ice in winter; the strange birds which sometimes frequented them; the progress of the trigonometrical survey, and the various tors on which the surveyors had camped; the new fashion of Teignmouth men and Exeter men—aye, even of London men—coming and camping out for a week or a fortnight at a time on the great moor.

She listened with her eyes cast down, and her hands holding the ponies' reins. She did not attempt to join in the conversation, into which Mrs. Barnes, and even the two girls, put an intelligent word now and then; but her downcast face lighted up at the mention of this or that well-known name, Red Cap, Red Windows, Windy Gap, Cree Tor, &c., with their stirring associations to the speakers. Then one of the gentlemen told how Charlie Leveret's pony, which had been in a dog-cart carrying a pleasure party to Woolcombe, had been imprudently left tied to a stump while the members of the party hunted for ferns. The tempted animal, scenting freedom from afar, had broken loose, started off, harness and all, and was not likely to be heard of till

the pony drift, while its abandoned freight had to trudge eight miles back on foot to Netherton.

The story was capped by narratives from Milly and Nettie Barnes, supporting each other, and taking the words out of each other's mouths. One of the long-horned Scotch cattle on the moor had met the Lacys' T-cart with the children. The brute had been irritated by their noise, had stood at bay, and at last had charged the cart, children, maids, groom, and all, until the Lacys' horse had been all but scared into leaping the traces, before the ox was sent off scouring the moor with only two feet on the ground and its tail in the air. Ned Dale had bought a drove of these cattle, and kept them locked up in his barn for a night; but when he let them out in the morning, they knocked him down, ran right over his prostrate body, and he only got up in time to see them leap five stone walls in their course across the country. He thought that was enough. Happily he had not paid the former owner the purchase-money, so he sent to him that he was off from the bargain. The man to whom they had belonged and the moormen might whistle for the cattle, whose haunts they knew if any one did.

'She has some good stuff in her; she is not so namby-pamby as I thought at first, and as her patroness would have had us believe,' Gregory Barnes came to the conclusion. 'She can't walk, poor thing! so she's forced back on such poor fare as books and seams, with the purple and brown moor lying all around her. But her ponies are not badly adapted for moorland tracks, and she drives them wherever there is a track, I hear. I am not so sure that she hasn't been bred to the moors—Yorkshire, if not Devonshire. I say, Lady Jones, do you know anything of camping out?'

'Not here,' she said quickly; 'in Australia.'

'Well, that may be the explanation,' he said aloud. 'I take it the scrub, or the bush, or for that matter the sand of the desert, is only another version of the heather and furze of the moor.'

The girls, who had learned sedulously to avoid every elderly person except their father and mother, arrived in a fashion of their own at the same conclusion. Lady Jones, in spite of her widow's weeds and her lameness, was actually jolly, and not at all like their Aunt Adeline.

'Will you allow us to stroke your ponies' noses? We always like to make the acquaintance of strange ponies,' Nettie, the franker of the two, had said experimentally, it is to be feared not without some idea of astonishing and scandalising the strange lady, and with the confident expectation—the one part of the programme destined to be fulfilled—of hearing Mrs. Reynolds exclaim in dismay, 'Oh, my dear girls, how can you propose such a thing or talk such nonsense? What will Lady Jones think of you?'

Whatever Lady Jones thought, she said cordially, with her sudden brief smile, 'Yes, do. And see, I keep some apples and pears in the chaise-pocket. Gooseberry prefers an apple, but Peascod rather likes a pear.'

'Oh! pray which is Gooseberry and which is Peascod? Do tell us, and let us try them with the apples and pears,' cried the girls, eager to make the attempt and to soil and crumple their frocks, which had not cost them the elaborate calculations and wearing doubts and difficulties into which her frock had plunged Lucy Endicott.

After five minutes the group broke up. Gregory Barnes, who had no end of acquaintances among the country people, 'sighted' this one, hailed that one, and started presently to make a round among his familiar cronies. His wife followed him at a little distance, accompanied by her sister.

Mrs. Barnes had a burden on her usually easy mind. She had heard her husband cry, 'Hey for with you, Jem Endicott, my lad! If it were not for this suit of clothes I've got into, I would lend you a hand. I've seen the day when neither tweeds nor broadcloth would have kept me back; not though it had been the dress coat of the hunt in which I went to balls—when balls were in fashion, I would have been in the thick of it. Your father would allow no intermeddling with what was his job, but you may not be so set up.'

In spite of the morning suit and of his rheumatic knee, Mrs. Barnes was not at all sure that the ruling passion would not prevail, and her husband indulge in a mad escapade for his years, if she were not at hand to remonstrate, beseech, and turn him back. She knew that though he might have reached his threescore and ten in the parish register, in spirit he was the youngest man hovering on the edge of Delaval Pool.

'How does your husband get to know such people?' complained Mrs. Reynolds, not relishing having to toil with the faithful wife at the squire of Barnes Clyffe's heels. 'I declare he is slapping that peasant in the smock-frock on the back, and he is buttonholing that farmer with trousers of the very loudest check I ever beheld. Between you and me, Emily, it is a pity that Gregory Barnes has such common, low tastes.'

'I don't know what you call common and low,' retorted her sister, firing up on the great bone of contention between the two, the one subject of dispute which fairly roused Emily Barnes. 'These are Oxcleeve people and Barnes Clyffe neighbours, whom Gregory has known all his life. They must have been Dr. Reynolds's patients when he was alive.'

'Yes, dear, but patients and friends are different,' said the doctor's widow, with gentle emphasis.

'I should not care to have a doctor who was not my friend. You are always attacking Gregory for not being a fine gentleman, Adeline; but for my part I see no gentleman like him, and I

know the girls think the same. He is entitled to speak to anybody he chooses to speak to.'

'Of course, and I am glad to say that he is speaking to the vicar now. So nice of Mr. North to be so pleasant. Such good taste and good feeling on his part not to make any difference for your sake, and I may say mine—not to let Mr. Barnes see how reprehensible his clergyman considers his conduct, and what a bad example he feels that his chief parishioner sets.'

'Bad example! reprehensible!' cried the poor lady, getting scarlet again. 'Really, Adeline, it is too bad. I wish you would be more careful what you say. I don't mind what fault you find with me or even with the girls, but I wish you would let my husband alone. Let him alone, did I say? He deserves nothing but praise from you and everybody. Nobody knows that better than the vicar. I'll just tell you what you drove me into doing after the last time you spoke to me like this. When I met Mr. North next it was in Ivy Lane, on my way to tell Polly Sykes that Mr. Barnes had got her grandson a place, and was going to send her a sack of potatoes. I went straight up to the vicar, and I said right out to him, before we could shake hands, "Mr. North, I have something to ask you. Is it true that you call my husband an infidel?"

'"An infidel! no, indeed, Mrs. Barnes," he cried, as amazed and indignant as I was when I first heard it. "There are points on which he and I differ, no doubt, but he is a dear Christian brother for all that."'

'Wonderfully forbearing and magnanimous,' murmured the lady, convinced against her will.

George Fielding had never ceased to be interested in the tenant of the Court, though he had not found many opportunities of cultivating her acquaintance hitherto. He was inclined to think that she shunned him as she shunned the rest of the world, except her landlord and his family. George stood a little longer beside her pony-carriage, and wondered what she was thinking of the whole affair. He said it was good of her to undertake to feed the holiday-makers in the room of the squire of Blackhall, but she hardly gave him an answer, and her manner was certainly cold, while she did not so much as look into his dark, shrewd face. He pointed out to her Mr. Lacy, the sleeping button-maker, in the most improved fashion of sombrero, which there was no sun to speak of to excuse. As he was a little man, his broad flapping hat made him look like a mushroom or a tin tack, George remarked; she gave him the faintest smile in reward. It was plain that Mr. Lacy's eccentricities did not have the smallest interest for her. She only woke up when she inquired if the lengthened exposure in the chill water of the pool, to which Jem Endicott was sentencing himself, might not be positively dangerous.

'Oh dear no; Jem is hardy, if he has no other advantage;

he said carelessly; 'so, for that matter, was his father before him. It took a good deal to kill poor old Endicott.'

'But this is not a question of killing,' she interrupted him, with sufficient fire at last on her lips and in her eyes. 'Why should he run any risk?'

'Why indeed?' asked George, shrugging his shoulders and lifting his eyebrows. 'The game is not worth the candle. If it must be gone through, it could as well be done on a genial day—on any genial day. There is no obligation on him or any other person to fix a day and collect a crowd to look on at the operation, which could be accomplished as effectually, probably rather more so, in private as in public. It is an old custom, and I fancy it is a point of honour to let the world see him play his part. In that case he must fix a day, and, having fixed it, he must abide by it.'

It was from the purest accident, and from no irresistible force of association, that he said the next moment, 'I see the school children have got a holiday. There is the Oxcleeve schoolmaster, and yonder is Tom Carew's daughter, North's pet scholar and little schoolmistress.'

Lady Jones was not so indifferent to Kitty Carew as to Mr. Lacy in his extinguishing sombrero; she not only looked round for Kitty, she sought to greet her. George Fielding became aware that Lady Jones had made the acquaintance of the schoolmistress. He was further sensible that Kitty evaded her ladyship's greeting.

The next instant Lady Jones looked sharply at him as if he had some meaning in his reference to Kitty's presence on the back of his remarks on Jem. He was innocent, but he went on speaking in order to carry off the awkwardness of the implication. As usually happens in such a case, by ill-luck, or from a shade of annoyance and injured dignity at the gratuitous supposition, he made matters worse instead of better by hammering on at the same subject. 'Kitty Carew used to be a very pretty girl, but she is going off in her looks in an unusual way for a fresh young Devonshire lass. She must be very much out of health, or teaching does not suit her, and is a greater grind even than it is said to be. She is hardly more than a girl, yet she looks haggard and worn.'

'Do you think so? Have you noticed it?' she inquired with hurried earnestness. 'I never spoke to her till the other day,' she went on to explain, 'when I went into the school with the vicar and Miss Lucy Endicott to look at the pupils' white seam.'

'Did Lucy Endicott really go there with you?' he exclaimed, off his guard, and speaking on the impulse of the moment.

'Yes; why not?' she demanded, with the same expression in her voice which had been in her eyes a moment before. 'It

seems to me that there are unnecessary mysteries and difficulties made about trifles in Oxcleeve. For one thing, people speak of the Endicotts—my landlord and his family—as if they carried a pestilence in their skirts.'

'I do not know of any mystery or difficulty,' he said, borrowing a shade of her coldness. 'I am afraid I spoke, as most of us do, without thinking or attaching any importance to my words. I should be glad to hear that the Miss Endicotts visited the vicar's school, or concerned themselves with their brother's labourers and their families. In my opinion, young ladies ought to have something to do, and it is well when they can make themselves useful.'

'It is not so easy as many people seem to think,' she said hastily and hotly. 'There is a good deal wanted for successful visiting among one's poorer neighbours: leisure—well, I can imagine the girls at Blackhall have that—experience, sympathy, the means of relieving the destitution they are sure to encounter. Men and women are very ready to condemn poor girls for leading idle, selfish lives when it may be they have not the tools for the only trade open to them. Don't you agree with me?'

'Well, yes, very likely you are right; you ought to understand better than I. I do not pretend to have any knowledge which can qualify me to speak on this point. Do you know,' he had resumed his friendly tone, 'I never had a sister, not even a sister-in-law, and I had the misfortune to lose my mother when I was a little chap of an unfledged schoolboy?'

'No,' she said promptly, 'you cannot know. But can you tell me,' with a sudden doubling back on the previous conversation, 'if the "Furze Bush" is a thriving concern? It cannot have much custom, but, on the other hand, there cannot be any outlay to speak of. Still, may not some trouble in connection with her father's affairs be weighing on this girl Kitty Carew's mind and harassing her?'

George looked incredulous. 'I have always understood Tom Carew to be well-to-do in his way, and she is his only child—a daughter he is known to be very proud of; whom he would have spoilt, I dare say, if the little schoolmistress would have let him. She is much better as she is than she would have been as mistress of an inn at her age. He had sense enough to see that, for Tom is long-headed and not illiberal in his notions. The vicar's favour and the school is also promotion for her on the score of gentility, with regard to which even Tom has his sensibilities.'

'It should render her more independent of him,' said Lady Jones thoughtfully.

'Yes, and be a good thing for her if he should marry again, which, of course, is always possible, though I don't think he is casting sheep's eyes on his cousin, Miss Betsy—the present mistress of the inn. However, it may be a case of "not

Lancelot, but another," and Miss Kitty may have strong feelings on the score of step-mothers. The advent of one of these traduced women may be the single drop of gall which is embittering her entire cup and fretting away her beauty. If so, I shall be driven to the conclusion that Kitty Carew is a more far-seeing, calculating, worldly-minded young woman than I took her for.' Lady Jones did not continue the conversation, and presently her self-elected squire left her.

Like Gregory Barnes, George Fielding had many old cronies and homely familiar friends met to inspect the dragging of Delaval Pool and eat their fill at Lady Jones's expense, and he was soon lost among them.

Down by the water, Lucy Endicott, among a few other persons—mostly those who counted on their share of the fish when the more valuable spoil of the net was distributed—was still going before Jem and looking brightly back at him as if she were encouraging and luring him on. In point of fact, Jem wondered impatiently what the mischief Lucy was doing there in that ridiculous white dress. He wished with all his heart that another woman would take her place—a little woman who never wore anything smarter now, whatever she might have worn a year or two ago, than her school ginghams and serges. She went in them to church and market, and looked in them, to Jem's mind, as no other girl looked, though people said her bloom was gone and she was as thin as a weasel. But it did not need Lucy to keep Kitty back; she would never come forward on her own account to greet him, he knew that well enough. Unless he plucked up courage and claimed her, she would die before she claimed him.

It was disgracefully inobservant in Jem to undervalue Lucy on this occasion, and to fail to see how fair and sweet she looked, especially after she was protected from the keen air by Lady Jones's soft white shawl. She might have been a white pigeon, pluming her feathers and tripping along on her dainty feet, more than keeping up with her brother as he tramped along, his stalwart shoulders pulled back by the strap across his breast, to which the net was fastened, his battered straw hat in danger of being blown off in the gusts of wind which lifted his hair beneath it, wet with the sweat of his toil, in spite of the coldness of the day and the work, his hands a blue-red, 'like lobsters,' Celia had commented, his bare feet the same, when he stepped on shore to make an alteration in his gear or to get a light to the pipe which was his single solace. Now and then he slid from his footing, struck out, and swam for a few yards, when Lucy could not resist giving a small scream, though she knew that she never did so without Jem's glaring at her, and mentally telling her not to be a fool. She was only set at ease on his account when the Rev. Miles appeared on the scene in the boating flannels, which went well with his blonde hair and complexion, and with a figure that

was as muscular and flexible as when its owner was in training at his university. He looked as little discomposed as when he entered the chancel in his white surplice, though, if Lucy had guessed it, the vicar hanging about in his light clothing, and not Jem hard at work, though in icy cold water, ran the greater risk of being chilled to the marrow by the untoward east wind blowing across the moor. Miles North strode into the water, notwithstanding Jem's gruff disclaimer and dismissal of his vicar's offer, and freed the net when it was caught among tree-roots and stones. He slung the long strap over his own shoulders also, while his cousin Tony in his correct shooting suit peered curiously from the shore at one of the successors of St. Peter marching side by side and keeping step with the refractory man. Miles swam when Jem swam, and recovered his footing as Jem recovered his, and went on unchecked and undaunted. Lucy Endicott thought Miles North was like a god among men, and felt inclined to wonder why all the world did not stop to applaud him. And she had not the least qualm for his safety. Delaval Pool would no more drown its vicar than the Tiber would drown Horatius Coccles, of whom she had read at Miss Penfold's.

The rest of the spectators, the most of them the clergyman's parishioners, grinned and wondered 'what the dickens he were up to, wasting his wind and his flesh and bones in this zort. This here were not zport. In coorse it were different a year agone, when Endicott of Blackhall were not to the fore, and Pool had to be cleared whatsondever. But here were Endicott at his post, and wherefore should vicar trouble hissen? It were not like as if Endicott were in danger of being drownded, though an it were zo, it were zo, and the country would be rid of the last of a bad unlucky lot—not that he could altogether help it. But Pool had been cleared by Endicotts withouten help zince the memory of man, and if Pool swallowed up the last on them, it might be to zave him from worsen—a good deal better for old Hugh, and them as had to do with him, if he had perished when he were a young man. Mappen Pool knew best and had a right, whereas parson had none to interfere.'

Doubtless the speakers would not have been quite so cold-blooded and impartial if there had been an accident, or much chance of an accident, before their eyes. As it was, Jem carried his point in having by far the heavier end of the string. Lucy's hero-worship was not altogether just—hero-worship rarely is—but it was very sincere, and, like all true worship, it exalted the giver as well as the receiver. Lucy looked very 'winsome' in her utter self-forgetfulness and humble admiration.

The vicar had no glory from his participation in the fatigue and hardship of dragging the pool in something like wintry weather. From Jem he had only the most grudging acknowledgment of undesired, incongruous *camaraderie*. From the onlookers the man who appeared to have descended from his

austere pedestal to inflict a needless penance on himself had no particular credit. Indeed, the Rev. Miles was not sure in his inmost soul that Jem and the rest were not right, and that he had been acting an officious, ostentatious part. In this light he would have been more or less than man if he had not found some compensation in the reverence, pride, and soft regard with which one foolish, fair young woman was viewing him. He must stop to sun himself in those glad, grateful blue eyes to assure her the water was not so very cold, to make light of the bitter wind, and to add that he minded it less when he saw that she was protected from it. It is to be feared the vicar looked as if he thought the wrap pretty as well as serviceable. It made her like a lamb after it had been washed in the Bar, and she was as gentle and defenceless, appealing as irresistibly to a man's strength and independence. It did not detract from the lamb simile, but rather accentuated it, that the hapless creature had been in the clutches of a wolf that was still following on her track.

CHAPTER XXII.

LADY JONES ENTERTAINS ALL THE WORLD.

The dragging of Delaval Pool was accomplished. A scaly tribute —in which, however, scaleless eels figured much more abundantly than trout—was turned out of the net amidst much slimy weedy matter and interesting specimens of minute reptiles by day and winged insects by night, whose double gifts nobody heeded save George Fielding. The trout and eels were apportioned according to strict equity, and the lion's share sent much too late for the banquet to the Court.

In the end Lady Jones had proved decidedly impracticable with regard to her part in the feast. She did not wish to be present either at the right hand of the chairman or of the croupier, who had been appointed to take the opposite ends of the principal table. Jem Endicott was as restive as her ladyship, and as unamenable to her influence as if she had not been a purely profitable and exceedingly generous tenant. He seemed to think that he was asked to connive at a farce of his being the people's entertainer, when he was nothing of the kind, and to be wroth because of the liberty taken with his honour and honesty. He would fill a place among the ruck of the company or he would not be there at all. George Fielding had to keep the peace by stepping into the breach, and undertaking, as the squire's agent, to support the vicar by taking the foot of the table. But Lady Jones did not seem to appreciate the substitute. She was so disconcerted at Jem Endicott's deserting her, by declining

to fill one of the seats of honour and take a lead in the proceedings, that she threatened to follow his example. A feast in honour of the dragging of Delaval Pool, at which the dragger refused to show himself, would be awkward; but a feast minus its giver would be more awkward still. Other ladies had announced their intention to be present: Mrs. Barnes and Mrs. Reynolds, the Miss Endicotts, some of the summer strangers, including Mrs. Lacy's sisters, who did not trouble about a regular introduction and a special invitation. Their presence would render the absence of the hostess doubly marked, and still more unpardonable. She had intended to do a kindness to the village and neighbourhood; she ought not to spoil it by refusing to countenance her own entertainment, though she might not choose to angle for popularity. It was only by urging these considerations on her that she was induced unwillingly to alter her hasty determination. This was the doing of George Fielding, who found himself called upon to enter the lists a second time that day with his hostess. He had been summoned by Mrs. Reynolds to her help, rather than that lady should sustain an ignoble defeat, which she felt she must do if the widow of the late Australian governor betrayed so little sense of what was due to her guests.

George had a notion that he himself was put in a false position, and constrained to behave with unwarrantable freedom when he stated the matter strongly to Lady Jones. But he did not find himself confronted with a perverse, unreasonable antagonist as he had been led to expect, only with a very sad and weary-looking woman in her widow's dress, having her white face turned away from him.

'Very well, then, Mr. Fielding; if you think I ought to do it, then it shall be as you say,' she gave in with a sigh. It was as if she had once had spirit to fight her battles, but at last the strength was crushed out of her. He felt tempted to call himself an interfering bully and brute for putting force on her inclinations and pressing her to face a trying ordeal and incur an amount of fatigue for which she probably felt herself quite unequal when it came to the point, and when her landlord failed her.

After that tussle with her ladyship, everybody concerned arrived at the conclusion that to bring a woman so timid and retiring for her years still farther forward, and attract more attention to her by drinking her health and sounding her good deed in feasting Oxcleeve in her hearing, would be little short of barbarity and insult. George Fielding knew the company would be greatly blamed for the singular omission, particularly the day's proceedings got into the 'Ashford Chronicle' without any previous warning, but he thought he could speak a word to the editor; anyhow, there was no help for it.

In the end George could not flatter himself that the whole

affair did not go off flatly, though he did his best to crack jokes with Gregory Barnes, and to make up for other deficiencies by the number of his raps on the tables and small speeches imploring everybody to make him or herself comfortable on the good roast beef, pies and puddings, ale and Australian wine. North might be a very good fellow and an excellent clergyman, but he did not belong to the branch of his cloth that shines at dinner-tables, and is unapproachable in neat compliments and telling anecdotes. He could not even contrive to prolong the proposing of the Queen's health, and to twist it round so that it should take in all the virtuous of her sex, with an indirect, modest reference to Lady Jones, which would not shame the shyest of women, and at the same time might serve as a lame excuse for leaving out the toast of the day. He was sure her Majesty would have forgiven the liberty if she had known their dilemma.

Greg Barnes was tired. Jem Endicott, who would not have been worth much at the best, was in the sulks among the ruck of the company, as he had threatened. Lacy was out of place; besides, he could speak of nothing but cockney sports and artistic effects. Tony North might have exerted himself and enlivened the party, but it would have been all in the wrong way, and he would have set half of the people by the ears and driven all the women and the more respectable of the men from the room before he had done. George Fielding could have wished the late Sir Benjamin, whose effigy in the best of broadcloth and the most massive of Australian gold chains loomed above them, alive again if that would have saved his poor widow from serving as a death's head at a feast.

There was some consolation in the fact that though Lady Jones did not attempt to go about waiting on her guests as Lucy Endicott had imagined, the idea having been taken from Sunday school children's feasts, her ladyship, who wisely left the waiting to the homely staff of the 'Furze Bush' and the more accomplished waiters brought over from Ashford, had not been by any means remiss in the quantity and quality of the victuals she had laid before her company. Through these the fathers and mothers of the hamlet—the Loveys as well as the Zeechys—plodded steadily, undismayed by any lack of hilarity. Still, it must be confessed, Lady Jones's deliberately planned dinner was a good deal of a failure, like Kitty Carew's improvised tea party. Something was amiss, something in the air damped the spirits both of hostess and guests.

The whole thing was better when the company began to break up. In order that there might be no danger to the public digestion, people were free, if they chose, to fall into groups, the better to chat over the last parish news, to repair to one of the other rooms where there were tea and cakes for the women and children, or to stroll out on the green among the ducks and

geese, or away among the back premises of the Court to smoke and stare, compare notes on the changes since Gentleman Granaway's time, and submit Lady Jones's potatoes and cabbages to a searching inspection before the last loiterer departed.

Lady Jones herself rallied a little, looked less wretched, and began to breathe again, though she still kept a little apart from the ladies who were her guests, even from the two Endicotts. The last instance of her reserve might not be entirely her fault. Celia Endicott certainly did not court her hostess's notice. She was still occupied, as in the earlier part of the day, endangering such popularity as her strong self-reliant character and nearly invariable high spirits secured for her, by doing her best to render herself and Tony North obnoxious on account of their manifest jibes at the country people around them.

Lucy, too, was engaged as happily as, nay, more happily than, in attendance on Lady Jones. Lucy, in conjunction with Milly and Nettie Barnes, was inaugurating a dozen half-grown lads and girls into games of dominoes and similar simple diversions which had been prepared for their delectation. Mrs. Reynolds might shudder at the temporary association, but Mrs. Barnes would not be induced to take it otherwise than easily. The girls could do each other no harm in the circumstances.

Unmistakably, the young people got on together well enough when left to themselves. Milly and Nettie had a full share of their father's frankness and their mother's tolerance, and were not incapable of doing something to 'spite' Aunt Adeline by thus setting her elaborate precautions to hedge them round like divinities at defiance before her eyes.

Lucy was not like Celia; she did not hate all the girls who were happier and better off than herself. If Celia would have let her, Lucy could have heartily liked these merry, madcap Barnes Clyffe girls, who could yet be sufficiently serious to be two of the most energetic teachers in the vicar's Sunday school. Lucy could not help deeply envying them his supposed commendations.

But it was not with the Misses Barnes's efforts to amuse the youthful company that the Rev. Miles chiefly expressed his satisfaction when he took a little respite from his heavy task of entertaining the seniors. He could not help seeing that they were dull and decorous with him, while they were shrewd and racy under the hands of their old friends George Fielding and Gregory Barnes. It was a small mortification, but it rendered him less capable of forgetting the one spark of personal homage to the man apart from the clergyman, the one atom of personal gratification that he had received in the course of his day's work. It seemed to him that it was not to the Misses Barnes, though they were nice enough young girls and suited him fairly as school teachers, that he owed a debt of gratitude, any more

than he owed it to Kitty Carew, who was his paid schoolmistress, or to Mrs. Reynolds, who would fain have constituted herself general inspector and supreme judge of all his duties. Milly and Nettie Barnes looked at him with wide open laughing eyes, critical in their laughter; nay, they were so eager and independent as to dispute with him some of his pet theories in teaching. It was to poor little Lucy Endicott, who had so few advantages and so many drawbacks and hardships in her lot, whose sole element of superiority was that she was beyond comparison the prettiest of the three, to whom, as he could well conceive, his word was law, in whose blue eyes he was a hero—the hero *par excellence*—that he was bound to give a gentle word, a kind look, since he could never, as he was fully assured, give her more. There was no wolf to dispute his right to do this, or to watch them both at this moment, though Lady Jones, in entertaining all the world, could not shut out the wolves of humanity. The Rev. Miles's evil-doing, evil-judging cousin had been there, but the scene had presented little attraction for him, even while he had Celia Endicott to keep him in countenance, make malicious eyes, and plot mischief with. And Celia had deserted him for the moment, having her attention taken up with fooling to the top of his bent a young lad among the summer visitors, and with vexing the lad's mother and sisters. Tony North was gone among the first of the departing guests.

The Rev. Miles, in spite of his wisdom and his goodness—in one sense because of his goodness—was walking in a somewhat perilous path. Lady Jones did not seem to recognise the peril or to disapprove of its source. When her glance fell on the cluster of girls, with Miles stooping to Lucy, their hostess's whole face kindled, softened, and beamed with a dim reflection of infinitely tender yearning and self-abandonment. George Fielding, catching the look, said to himself emphatically, 'That is a good woman. She may be childless, but she has a mother's heart in her breast.'

In the brightening and expansion of feeling which had come to her, Lady Jones went so far as to propose to show George the flowers in her porch and the pigeons on her gables.

'You are a witch, Lady Jones,' he said lightly; 'who told you that my hobby was pigeons? I have never been able to resist them since I was a boy. I have a whole caravan—if you can call a succession of dovecots on the end of my garden-tool house a caravan—full of them. I flatter myself that I can show as good specimens of jacobins, poulters, fantails, tumblers, and runts as any urchin in Devonshire. I know they thieve like mad, and do not even respect their master's property. So far from confining their depredations to my neighbours' rows of peas, as I have a right to expect, they ravage mine in the most barefaced and heartless manner. I have to flee before the face of my old gardener many a morning. But what would you have?—a

man must pay for his pleasures, even if they are no worse than pigeons. The popular idea and slang association with them is that they are the plucked and not the pluckers. But popular ideas are rarely correct, are they?'

'I don't know. I have heard the people's voice is the voice of God. But it is not my pigeons, it is those ducks and geese out on the green that I seem to see for ever straddling and cackling through people's lives. I wonder how many human histories they have disposed of since their long necks and foolish legs were first instituted?'

'Since the little affair of the Roman Capitol, which covered them with unmerited glory—a good many, I should say.'

'If you will come with me to the back of the house, I can let you see my solitary quail.'

She led the way with her slow, slightly wavering gait, which would brace itself up for an instant as if the will to walk firmly and fast was there, though the physical power was gone. It was as if even memory played its tricks on her, and she would forget for a second the lost capacity which prevented her from doing any longer what was once so natural to her that it was well-nigh as instinctive as the act of breathing.

She was about to take him through one of the congeries of outhouses. 'You remember,' she said, 'that I have had this old brewhouse partitioned and fitted up as a laundry and washhouse. I sometimes think if there were much poverty about the place in a hard winter—though I hope not, I like to believe in the people as preserving their homely independence—this house might be turned back in a measure to its original use, only instead of brewing beer the coppers would boil soup for the families in want of it.' Lady Jones threw open the door as she spoke; but the room was not empty, a young man and a young woman had taken the same route to the back of the house, probably unacquainted with the changes under the new *régime*, which had converted the old, half-ruinous, disused brewhouse into a modern laundry and washhouse in frequent operation. Having entered unawares, the pair were availing themselves of the seclusion to finish an agitating discussion, in which they had been so deeply engrossed as not to hear approaching steps and voices, or notice the momentary opening of one of the doors, which Lady Jones immediately closed again as if she had received a blow in the face.

The couple, who did not see the intruders, were well known to both of them. The woman in the plain gingham frock, standing by the ironing-table with her side face to them, stiff and still like a statue, having grey shadows in the carnations of her cheeks and lips which were hard and set, was Kitty Carew.

The man, in an ordinary morning suit, leaning against the mangle, directly facing the entrance, but so much overcome by

the contest in which he was engaged that he had neither eyes nor ears for anything else, was the late dragger of Delaval Pool. Moreover, it was Jem Endicott taken at a sore disadvantage. For it was not the girl, but the lad—no doubt more worn out than he had confessed with the struggle and exposure of the morning, and brought once more into fierce fight with a problem as painful as it seemed insoluble—who was moved to tears, the stormy, scalding tears of indignant young manhood which appear to shame the eyes that shed them. It was the strangest and most piteous sight, that glimpse of the sturdy, surly Jem, his face, in the old expressive language of Scripture, 'foul with weeping.'

It is bad enough at any time for two persons who are going on their way, in the innocence of their hearts and in the superficial light comedy of common life, to find that they have strayed in an inadmissible direction, and stumbled on a locality where their presence was least desirable. But it is infinitely worse to step with a plunge into one of the tragedies of human experience for which the reluctant spectators can do nothing, which, if they wish to be kind and merciful, they will bury in their inmost hearts and never breathe to mortal ears. And if anything can aggravate still further the awkwardness and distress of the situation to the blameless spies, it is when they are not on intimate terms with each other, but are mere acquaintances, though they may have a common lively interest in the principals engaged in the unhappy drama.

George Fielding stood aghast at what he had seen, and could not even look at his companion till he was conscious that she stumbled in her weakness, when he led her back into the porch. It was vacant, and no curious eyes commanded it—only the geese beyond the gates cackled more loudly than ever, as if these wiseacres proclaimed, 'We know all about it—trust us for that.'

'Oh, poor Jem!' Lady Jones was saying, wringing her hands as she spoke. 'Poor Jem Endicott! Can nothing be done to help or save him?'

'Why, the young rascal has insisted on standing alone and bearing his own burden,' cried George angrily; 'and it was what one could respect him for, though it was a hopeless business; but it is a different matter if he has gone and dragged another person, a poor girl, into his troubles, and is prepared to sacrifice her as well as himself. Say rather "Poor Kitty Carew!" though she, too, might have known better, and this is a miserable end of all her precocious cleverness and sense.'

George Fielding was thinking, with some indignation, that all women were alike. Lady Jones might be superior to the more rampant prejudices of the mass; but she was a woman, and, therefore, instantly ranged herself on the man's side, and took Jem Endicott's part in the ill-omened transaction. What man

witnessing the scene which they had just beheld would not at once have regarded Kitty, though she should have known better, as the real object of compassion?

Lady Jones sat up with a face like ashes, and put a trembling hand that closed like a vice on his arm. She faltered out:

'But she is a good girl, George. George Fielding, you do not mean to say that you doubt her; that you can believe Jem Endicott is a scoundrel?'

He was thoroughly startled and taken aback both by her looks and words and her use of his Christian name. Then he recollected that she was a singular woman with a puritanical tinge, one likely to take strong views on certain points. It had been also brought against her, either by Mrs. Reynolds or somebody else, that she fell occasionally into colonial or Quaker freedoms of speech.

He, too, took strong views on some things, while he was not particular on others. He had no objection—were it not for the opinion of the world—to Lady Jones's calling him 'George Fielding' to his face as well as behind his back—not to say occasionally, but permanently. In the meantime he was able, with perfect sincerity, to reassure her on what was after all the fundamental question, while she did not seem inclined to call him George again. She listened intently as he answered gravely:

'Yes and no, Lady Jones. Kitty Carew is a good girl; I am certain of it; and I do not for a moment suppose that Endicott, with all his faults, would do anything to change her from good to bad. Good heavens! that would be villainy indeed, with a girl like her, even if you could suppose her capable of being made weak and wicked.'

'I beg your pardon, and hers and his also,' her ladyship said quite humbly. 'But you know there are very different standards of morals in the world. Remember, I never thought he could do such a base thing, though he has his faults, as you say, and always shows his worst side to the world. Poor Jem Endicott!' she repeated, with a certainly womanly pride which was almost tender.

'It passes me to comprehend how her landlord has contrived to get so far into her good graces, and acquire such a hold over her,' George speculated. 'Jem is not found generally attractive, though he must have succeeded in turning so wise a head as that of Miss Kitty Carew; but that is another matter. This woman at my side must have a large heart, poor thing! with not many to fill the spare room which the late Sir Benjamin has left vacant. I wonder what sort of duffer he was, and if she was very fond of him? He must have been very much older than she, notwithstanding her grey hair and helplessness. Governors, like admirals, are not, as a rule, gay youths; and he had to make his fortune first, I take it, in wool

and tallow. He may have looked sharp, but he could not do it in a day.'

His mind was distracted from the subject in hand by a habit he had learnt, which disposed him to pause for an instant and ponder on the woman in weeds at his side. She brought him back to his sheep with a quick run.

'But what does this which we have seen mean?' she inquired in the most straightforward manner.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'What indeed?' he echoed drily, 'unless a couple of wasted lives and one broken heart or more. Mr. Jem Endicott is mad to entertain the idea of marriage at all, and in his pig-headedness he has contemplated it in a quarter where it would be irremediable and utter ruin to him.'

There was another pause while she sat and reflected on one of the pilgrim's seats in the porch, which had appeared so little likely to be sat upon; he stood beside her waiting for an answer, and the geese hissed at the consultation outside the gate.

'I have been a good deal about in the world,' she said at last, 'and have learned in the colonies to look at some things differently from the way in which they are regarded at home. Jem Endicott has fallen, and Tom Carew's daughter has risen, in the world. There is not such a wide disparity between them in education and habits as your words would argue. When it comes to that, Carew is a good old Devonshire name—as good as Endicott.

George laughed at her feminine inconsistency. 'Better in some respects,' he said sarcastically, 'but good names are to be found hereabouts in queer company. I don't think that Carew pretends to be even of yeoman descent—I believe his father was a groom—as it happens Tom rose in life before his daughter did. It may be an hereditary gift; if so, no doubt it is a valuable inheritance. Tom Carew is a worthy fellow in his line, reasonable and well-to-do; but if he were to take even a third of Jem Endicott's debts on his back, they would soon fly away with Tom's modest savings. The only manner in which it could be managed would be for Jem to throw up his position as squire of Blackhall, gentle birth and breeding and all the rest of it, let the bondholders on his property take their pound of flesh till the whole was cut up, then he might go in for the inn and farming business as helper and successor to his father-in-law.'

'That would never do,' said Lady Jones emphatically.

'No,' assented Fielding quietly. 'It might do in the colonies, as you are aware, but not here. There would be little prospect of happiness. It would probably be doing for Jem in another way. Besides, what would become of his sisters? The fellow must consider them, now that he has taken the responsi-

bility of them on his shoulders, though, poor beggar, he had little choice.'

'I don't know that they have considered him much—at least, not in the right way,' she said impatiently. 'Lucy is sweet and dear, and tries her best, but even she seems to have no notion of helping herself and relieving her brother. Surely there are ways in which women can work and keep themselves in this country, apart from hanging on to their male relatives, whether under the pretext of looking after their houses and taking care of the men, or with no excuse. The women are like ivy, strangling and suffocating the men in the end.'

'Surely,' said George demurely. 'But the ways are not very easy, I suspect, and some young ladies find them hard to discover. As for these unfortunate Endicott girls, they have been heavily handicapped from the first: no home training, a stigma attached to their name, and Jem unfit to advise and help them. I wish Mrs. Hugh Endicott and women like her, who often get credit for goodness of heart and softness of temper, would pause in their career of passion and cowardice and calculate the punishment inflicted on the innocent children by the mother's headstrong determination not to endure any longer the consequences of her unutterable folly. I wonder,' he said in a lower tone, as if carrying out his train of thought without reference to his listener, 'that their elder sister did not take that into account.'

Lady Jones sat and heard him with bent head. 'I thought,' she said hesitatingly, 'that charitable people had come to the conclusion Mrs. Endicott and her eldest daughter ran away in order that the mother might escape from intolerable persecution, and to put an end to miserable, disgraceful family strife.'

'All the same, it was a fatal mistake,' he said with decision, 'for their own reputation, in the interests of the younger members of the family—even for Hugh Endicott, whom they abandoned to his fate.'

'But what could they have done for him,' she asked in troubled tones, 'when he was mad, as I have understood, against the wife and mother? Why, he might have murdered her some day.'

'I don't deny the possibility,' he said very gravely, 'but it seems to me that it would have been better to suffer death outright, the common natural death, even though it had come by violence from the hand of a madman, in an act which would have indubitably proved him insane all along, than to die before her time to everything that good women prize. Remember, she died to honour, to the children who wanted her, to her home throughout her married life, to every friend she had ever possessed—except her daughter Joanna—to all hope of better days. Besides, though the horrible end you have suggested was barely possible, it was far from probable. If the

mother and daughter had stayed on as duty bade them, they might have found another answer to your question of what they could do. But I have no wish to judge them,' he finished quickly. 'Certainly Hugh Endicott was mad, like any doomed man.'

'Can you tell me,' she said, with a catch in her breath, and still in the same hushed tone, as if death were in the place where the speakers talked together, 'if the old man died alone, if there was nobody to take pity on him in his extremity?'

'He was not so very old,' he corrected her; 'he was still within a year or two of seventy, and he was not left altogether to himself; a woman who used to be about Blackhall—Bessie Lyte, I think'—he stopped to recall the name.

'Yes, Bessie Lyte,' she exclaimed quickly, hanging on his words.

'One of those old women who are born care-takers of people as well as houses, who like to see the end of both persons and places, was with him, and was as kind to him as he would let her be. Perhaps in his semi-delirium he could not have borne other company. He had medical attendance. The parish clergyman went to offer his services. My father, who had been Mr. Endicott's agent, drove over to see him more than once. It was his opinion that poor wild lost Hugh had lucid intervals and moments of relenting. The last time my father saw Endicott he had a horse's tail in his poor feeble hand to brush away the flies which troubled him. My father thought it had belonged to the old pony of the daughter whom the man had defamed. He had kept it by him all the time, though he had ordered the pony to be shot after she went away.'

'I am afraid I have sat long enough; they must be missing us indoors. Pray excuse me,' she said with an abrupt movement, rising and tottering from the afternoon light in the porch into the shadow of the house. He watched her taking her way, but not to either of the public rooms. 'That woman must have had sorrows of her own,' he told himself with a certain awe creeping over him. 'She may have erred also, though I hardly think so. Anyhow, her sorrows and her errors, if she did sin against her neighbours, are past, poor soul! it is only the scars and the after-gloom which remain. I wonder what made me enter into that dismal family history? I suppose it was her peculiar interest in the Endicotts which induced me to go into their story.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE 'APPEARANCES' AT BLACKHALL.

THIS is a curious generation when credulity shakes hands with incredulity, and a glare of light from mathematically accurate science and logically definite reason and philosophy is balanced by a revolt of the imagination or the soul, with excursions, as in the dark ages, into the dim domain of what is unseen, immeasurable, and incapable of proof. Fifty or sixty years ago science was less daring and triumphant, commentary and criticisms were comparatively timid and respectful, while the great field of the supernatural, especially of the ghastly sort, was largely ignored and neglected save by the most primitive folk. Nearly every educated man and woman at least professed utter disbelief in such manifestations. To tell a ghost story except as an excellent joke was to excite loud derision. To write a ghost story might be pardonable when it was sufficiently fantastic, morbid, and weird, unmistakably the creation of a brain at once poetic and distempered, as in the case of 'Frankenstein.' But to write and then print a tale—a plain, unvarnished tale of honest, practical, generally righteous disembodied spirits haunting the scenes of their former experience, to avenge crime, expose fraud, warn the unwary, check the evil-doer, repair neglect, comfort misery—would have been to issue productions certain to be relegated to the nursery or the kitchen, and covered with contempt in other quarters. The genius of Sir Walter Scott created the Bodach Glas, and compelled his readers to rise superior to the matter-of-fact standard of the time; but even Sir Walter's spell did not win much faith or favour for the White Lady of Avenel in 'The Monastery,' or the 'Bloody Finger' in 'The Betrothed.'

Now all this is changed. The tidal wave of men's opinions has rolled back or forward in dire despair of glib explanations of everything under the sun, of the deadly dulness of commonplace and the equally prostrating extinguishing dulness of overdone analysis and over-worked manner of saying a thing which is not worth saying when all is done. The reign of the ghosts has come again. It began with subtle or vulgar spiritualism, it has progressed into more healthy and human supernaturalism. There is actually a society for cross-examining ghosts in their stories, as if they were worthy of that polite piece of attention. And there is this gain to the generation, something like an acknowledgment that there is more in heaven and earth than any system of man's philosophy, however complete in itself, can

weigh, sift, and tie up into neat little bundles, each with its appropriate ticket.

As it happened, Blackhall and Oxcleeve were not to be left out in the race after the supernatural. Suddenly, with the how and why of its origin left conveniently vague, an exciting, nerve-thrilling gossip arose in the village and spread to the better-class houses in the neighbourhood. Certain 'appearances' had begun again in the nineteenth century to present themselves, after a long interval, at Blackhall and round about Oxcleeve. During a period of many years nothing of the kind had been seen, heard, or believed in, unless when the familiar stage chanced to be crossed by such extraordinarily fit recipients of occult influences as a scared cow-boy or an hysterical maid-servant, who got himself or herself loudly laughed at for silly panics. But the scared cow-boy and the hysterical maid-servant were about to be revenged; and though there had been a long truce, the oldest inhabitants of Oxcleeve at once recognised the visitations and attributed them to the proper quarter. 'Us knows,' they said oracularly, 'us 'a heerd on un afore; many's the time when we were childer. Who wid it be but Zpanish Madam at her pranks after a powerful rest?'

'Did you ever hear such lamentable superstition?' Mrs. Reynolds, holding up her hands, addressed the vicar, whom she had come upon when he was paying his respects at the Court a few weeks after the village dinner. 'I have often told you of the gross darkness of the people here—worse than that of heathens, it seems to me, and so inconsistent. Roger Granaway, Gentleman Granaway's grand-nephew, who is in consumption like so many of the young people here, stopped me when I was reading the Scriptures to him and asked me if I believed in witches. "Certainly not," I answered, trying to put him down. Then, he said, what did I make of the witch of Endor, and of her raising up the ghost of Samuel? I am sure that lad is guilty of the profanity of questioning the witch of Endor, though I don't doubt he will swallow any amount of idiotic lies about this Spanish Madam, as the people call her, and her appearances at Blackhall. As if persons and events in the Bible were to be brought into comparison with figures and incidents in ordinary life, even in secular history! Who would believe that my brother-in-law, Mr. Barnes, could lend any encouragement to the silly and wicked imposition? Yet he speaks of coming over to hear the tale for no other reason than that he used to be told about the Spanish Madam's ongoings when he was a boy. The old servants at Barnes Clyffe were always strong on her when ghosts were talked about. She had often sent him shivering to bed, driven to pull the sheets over his head, though he could fight boys twice his size and age. I hope he won't infect my nieces with his odd tastes. Girls are so impressionable, so fond of anything new.'

'But this seems rather an old thing,' said Lady Jones, 'so old that I never so much as heard of the Spanish Madam. Who could she possibly have been? I don't believe there ever was such a person,' she added, with a fine incredulity which ought to have delighted Mrs. Reynolds.

'Excuse me, you are wrong there,' said the vicar rather indifferently, like a man who did not trouble himself about these exceptional and erratic spirits. His important business was with the spirits of all men, whether in the body or out of the body, waiting to receive their solemn sentence. He had nothing to do with isolated specimens of their kind—permitted, if there was any truth in their history, to escape from their fellows and show themselves again on the earth on which they ought to have turned their backs when the bodily part of them drew its last breath. But he condescended to explain himself. 'There appears to have been an Endicott, a squire of Blackhall, who went to Bristol on one occasion a couple of centuries ago. He went farther; he took a voyage, as a gentleman adventurer, to the Spanish Main. I don't know that he was successful in his enterprise, except in one particular. He brought back with him a Spanish wife—the Spanish Madam referred to.'

'But why has she never been heard of before?' persisted Lady Jones, apparently as much taken up with the personality of the Spanish Madam as with her eccentric preference for this world over other regions better peopled with her contemporaries. 'I don't believe the Endicotts themselves know anything about her.'

'She has been frequently heard of before, as the patriarchs of the village and Mr. Barnes are ready to bear witness. But it may easily be that she was not approved of, or spoken about, in the family, and that the younger members are ignorant of her very existence—particularly as, from the little which can be learned about her at this date, she appears to have been a singularly obscure individual—for a ghost. She had enjoyed what is considered to be the happiest lot for a woman in having no history—at least she left little or none behind her. Except that she quitted her West Indian island, we may presume with her own consent, and settled with her English husband at Blackhall, she had no grievance worth speaking of, of which the memory has survived to warrant her in revisiting her old home. In that sense she is an arrant impostor.'

'Where did you get your information?' Lady Jones asked abruptly, and with something of provoked jealousy in her tone which made the grave young vicar laugh.

'I shall not keep you in suspense, or pretend to any dealings on my own account with the Spanish Madam. I was over at Ashford, and dined with Mr. Fielding. I told him what Oxcleeve was saying, and he, too, not only identified the ghost, he said it was odd that he had happened to speak of it, though it had not

occurred to his mind for years before—the last time he was at Blackhall. The Endicotts heard of their ancestress then, however ignorant they might have been of her existence before. The coincidence was fortunate, since they learnt what a harmless person the heroine had been before the new version of her appearances fell out of the clouds, or rose from the moor mists.'

'What did George Fielding say?' inquired Lady Jones, with the same pertinacity. She fairly vanquished Mrs. Reynolds in the quality of determined curiosity for which that lady was justly renowned. Moreover, Lady Jones's inquisitiveness was the raw material, while Mrs. Reynolds was more or less clumsily disguised and overshadowed by her egotism.

Miles North smiled again. He felt that he had alighted on an idiosyncrasy of the lady whom he admired and liked, but did not, any more than the rest of the world, understand. In spite of her intelligence and sense she must be fond of a ghost story, yet he would have thought that Australia was too new a country for ghosts. Were the Australian ghosts bushrangers or squatters, murdered or murderous gold-diggers, or hardly treated savage aborigines?

'Fielding said he had heard old people speak of former appearances at Blackhall, while he had a faint recollection of the mention of a Spanish wife of one of the squires in two or three old letters which he had in his keeping among other family papers that had belonged to Hugh Endicott. He took the trouble, at an idle moment, of looking over the letters, in order to ascertain what ground there was for the vagaries of the popular mind in the ghost story. He found literally nothing, except that there had been a lady of Spanish birth and West Indian rearing mistress of Blackhall early in the seventeenth century, and that naturally she seems to have felt the cold of the moor. For she was in the habit of going about wrapped in what he judges must have been an Andalusian cloak from the corruption, "a long black Lusian," with her head muffled in a lace veil.'

'What a fright!' cried Mrs. Reynolds, with a giggle.

'Was that all?' asked Lady Jones, still giving her entire attention to the story.

'He says there is not the slightest evidence of her having been beaten, or starved, or flung into the Bar. She conformed to her husband's religion, and so incurred no persecution as a Papist. She survived him, but as he died when he was absent in London, while she was staying at Blackhall, that amounts to proof positive that she did not make away with him; besides, she had no conceivable reason for doing so. She had no stepchildren to cheat and persecute. Her own son succeeded to the property; and she was held in sufficient respect and regard by her descendants to have her Spanish name descend among them, as Fielding says it did continue in the family, though the

remembrance of the original bearer of the name may have died out. He declares she would be a most ungrateful woman if she did not own her indemnifications. Her husband might have tired of her and sent her back to where she came from, particularly as he was acquainted with the convenience of Bristol in relation to the Spanish Main. The savages on the moor—there were savages as well as sheep and cattle so late as the seventeenth century—might have waylaid and murdered her for her disused rosary, or her mantilla. After such hair-breadth escapes, lifelong exile, the cold of an English moor to any one accustomed to Jamaica and Barbadoes, with such trifling disputes as were likely to arise, say, from her injudicious introduction of garlic into the domestic *cuisine*, don't deserve to be recorded. Fielding insists that he does not know what she would be at. Oblivion comes to Cæsar himself in the long run, and oblivion is the only wrong that the Spanish Madam can complain of, so far as he has discovered; while redress, in the shape of her haunting the spot where she was reasonably well treated and happy, appears to have been very much in her own hands.'

Mrs. Reynolds was mystified, and wondered disdainfully how Mr. Fielding could let himself talk such nonsense. It might be taken as a delicate hint that she was also surprised to find her admirable vicar could repeat the nonsense.

'Well, I never heard of her before,' Lady Jones said again, shortly and simply, as if her ignorance was a marvel to be chronicled.

'My dear Lady Jones, how could you hear?' remonstrated Mrs. Reynolds, fitting her gloves more exactly on her fingers as she leant back in one arm-chair. The vicar lay back in another and twirled Lady Jones's whip, which she made a feint of using against Gooseberry and Peascod, and had brought in with her from a drive. Her hands were tightly clasped in the heat of listening, and she had sat down most indecorously, as Mrs. Reynolds was disposed to think, like a tall schoolgirl on a square stool. A schoolgirl with white hair and a widow's cap! Could anything be imagined more awkward and undignified? Poor Lady Jones had no head for *bienséances*, and must have been a great trial in a Government House, even at the Antipodes.

'You are really only a new-comer,' went on Mrs. Reynolds blandly, 'though I am sure we regard you as a dear old friend. You yourself said, only a minute ago, that you did not believe the Endicotts themselves had ever heard a syllable of this absurd Spanish Madam. A foreigner whom nobody knew anything about,' moralised the lady, 'a Roman Catholic originally, though supposed to have conformed to her husband's creed—that may account for something in later generations. I confess I have no fancy for foreigners in intimate relations with English families, and I need not say that I am too good a Churchwoman to care

for the bigoted adherents of the Pope,' with a bow and smile to the vicar. 'Whatever the Endicotts were before this Spaniard turned up among them, I have no doubt rapid deterioration followed upon the mixed marriage. 'However,' as if with an effort to be judicial, 'we must remember that the late unfortunate Mrs. Endicott was not an Endicott by birth, and so could have had nothing to do with the Spanish Madam.'

Lady Jones half rose, but sat down again when the vicar said in lower and graver tones than he had yet employed, with something of lurking personal consciousness in his voice, 'Fielding asserts that if any poor woman who ever had to do with the Endicotts possessed the will or the power to come out of her quiet grave and wander about her former haunts, there are others who had a better right—a great deal more reason—if suffering is to be counted a reason—for availing themselves of the privilege.'

Lady Jones rose altogether this time and moved a little away with a restless sweep of her black dress across the carpet, but returned in time to hear Mrs. Reynolds vigorously remonstrating with the clergyman, as she had previously remonstrated with the lady of the house, though on a different count.

'But you do not mean to say for a minute, Mr. North, that you give any credence to ghosts and their visitations?' She spoke as if the credence would be a deliberate insult to the Thirty-nine Articles. 'Such childish superstition was set at rest by the united conviction and testimony of every enlightened mind long before our day. It is without a single warrant in Scripture.'

'Unless, as my friend Roger Granaway pointed out, in the raising of Samuel by the witch of Endor, and in the case of Job who had an encounter with a spirit—if ever flesh and spirit met and survived the meeting,' the Rev. Miles defied his assailant. He told himself afterwards in his strict self-discipline that it was one more instance of an inclination which he had pledged himself times without number to resist and conquer—even a frantic desire which frequently overtook him when he was in Mrs. Reynolds's company to contradict her, were it to tell her that black was white and white black.

Lady Jones spoke again, keeping, as she was wont to do, to the main thread of the conversation, while she indulged in a string of pertinent questions. 'When and where has the Spanish Madam been seen? What is she like? Who saw her? What did she say or do—if she condescended to speak or act beyond the mere fact of her appearance?'

'The Beavers, husband and wife, say they have seen her at different times, and there is weight lent to their testimony by the fact that it has been reluctantly given. A feeling of something due to the family kept them silent on what they saw, till other people spoke and the village was ringing with the story.

Then, and not till then, the Beavers made a clean breast of it, and admitted that they had encountered the strange visitor. She is always wrapped in her long black cloak, with her head and face muffled in lace. Fielding is of opinion that it was the dash of picturesqueness in her foreign origin and in the details which have been preserved of her dress that caught the people's fancy at the first, and caused it to lay hold of an ordinary enough woman with a not very extraordinary history, and make her figure as a ghost through successive generations. They may also have half forgotten her personality, or confused it with that of other and less happy women, who, like her, bore the name of Endicott. If it is not so, he holds it as a proof of Devonshire stolidity that the natives have not invented a few crimes or sufferings which might have been either committed by her or inflicted on her. She ought, by this time, to have at least poisoned one or two of her neighbours or been secretly strangled in her own person. By-the-bye, I should have said that she crouches and shivers and spreads out her hands, as if she were in search of a blazing fire.'

'And who besides the Beavers saw her? Lady Jones continued her cross-questioning.

'A number of silly, lying people; there is never any want of them,' said Mrs. Reynolds cynically. 'Zecchy Sampson and Lovey Veale, who both declare they saw the Spanish Madam in their youth, and so are ready primed for the same spectre in their age, though they might have learned wisdom with years. It is melancholy to find how these creatures cling to their superstitions.'

'And Patty Wayland, who is always spying "ferlies" when she is coming from market or "shooing" in her geese,' interposed the vicar drily.

'Oh! as to what Patty saw coming from market,' cried Mrs. Reynolds, quite ready to take up the cudgels, 'that was a very different thing. Her statement then has been amply verified. But now there is John Polglase; he might have had more sense. I have talked to that fellow by the hour, and lent him newspapers—actually my newspaper along with my distributing tracts, because he can read perfectly well—yet he swears that the Spanish Madam passed and repassed him, both going and coming, as he was on his way to the Birches to see after a lame sheep.'

'Then she must not confine herself to Blackhall,' said Lady Jones. 'Patty Wayland's goose green is ten minutes', and the Birches nearly half an hour's walk from the house.'

'Oh no, she is quite impartial; she makes no invidious distinctions. She has been seen in every part of the village: on the Ashford Road; even halfway down the Cleeve, so she shows me some favour,' announced Miles with modest pride. 'But when she is at home—I suppose she calls Blackhall home still—

she confines herself to the older parts of the house, the quarter given over to lumber and rats, where Beaver keeps his sheep-shears and scythe, and his wife goes to fetch firewood.'

'I cannot make it out,' said Lady Jones in a low perplexed voice.

Neither could anybody at Blackhall, apparently, make out this remarkable episode in the everyday life of the place, while the different members of the household took it, each after a different fashion, according to their various characters. The Beavers, though they were ostensibly the chief victims, seeing that they stumbled upon the Spanish Madam when they were doing nothing worse than going about their daily work, were not the greatest sufferers. They were solemnised, but not so awe-struck as to deprive them of a certain sense of dignity in being a select and credible audience for the phenomena, while they had at the same time behaved with the reserve and discretion becoming confidential and trusted servants. Beaver was the more impressed, Sally the more complacent of the two.

The master of Blackhall was as incredulous as and still more indignant than Mrs. Reynolds. He said there were enough troubles at Blackhall, without asses and blockheads inventing bogies. Who was the Spanish Madam? He did not half believe in the existence of such a person in the past, though Fielding professed to unearth her from one of his musty strong-boxes. Jem wished there were no worse spectres than that of a fictitious Spanish Madam at Blackhall. He would give Beaver his leave on the spot if he talked any more rot on the subject. It was gross impertinence in the people in the village not to let the dead rest in their graves, and to go about concerning themselves with the Endicotts past and present. Let the people mind their own business, as he would be thankful to be left in peace to mind his. If he thought it was any imbecile gossip of Sally Beaver's which had brought this mare's nest to light, he would dismiss her without a month's wages and let the housekeeping and cooking take care of themselves. Three idle women in a house to wait on themselves and on a couple of men in times like these! Little wonder that men had to be dragged through the dirt of a bankruptcy court.

Celia had the best of it; she not only took the keenest interest in her recently discovered ancestress's inexplicable restlessness, she came out of her own lazy or selfishly busy preoccupation, and absolutely took pains to make herself acquainted with the minutest tattle about the Spanish Madam, getting no end of sardonic fun out of it. She made Lucy's hair stand on end with her irreverent mockery and grisly jests. Poor Lucy made the loudest protestations of her complete disbelief in the appearances of the family ghost; indeed, she expressed her strong conviction of the utter absurdity of ghosts *in toto* out of ghost-land. She was even more fervent in her

lack of faith than Jem displayed himself; yet she was really frightened half out of her wits. She confined her peregrinations religiously to the inhabited region of the house, and she dared not go about there at night by herself, even with a lamp. She started at her own shadow in broad day. She could not smother ejaculations of terror when mice skurried and squeaked behind the wainscot.

The girl's nerves were, for various reasons, in a pitiable state. All her clamorous professions of incredulity, her desperate clinging to common sense and strong-minded superiority to vulgar portents, did not help her; neither did some trembling, horrified suspicions which she could share with nobody.

Lucy was a thousand times more shaken and appalled than the oldest mumbling grandfather and grandmother, the youngest open-mouthed lad or lass of them all. And if anything could have increased Celia's unholy glee at the performances of the Spanish Madam, it was the small frenzy which any mention of them produced in Lucy. Celia would literally shake with laughter when Lucy would grow white with mingled apprehension and anger. For Lucy, like Jem, was very angry at any word of a new shadowy scandal in a family which had already too many and too black scandals to fight against. At last she would cover her ears with her hands, duck her head and run away, as her only resource to escape from the unwelcome subject.

'I wonder how and where she will be seen next—this troublesome progenitress of ours?' said Celia with easy speculation, standing with her arms a-kimbo as she had a habit of doing, and looking at Lucy tripping about her flower-stand keeping her flowers in apple-pie order, or busy with her task-work, providing fresh covers for this stool or that cushion which Jem never came in without upsetting and disarranging. 'Don't you think it is rather tiresome of her, though it saves trouble no doubt, never to alter her manifestations—always to wear that dowdy black Andalusian cloak and lace muffler, for instance? She might show herself in a flame of fire for a change. Now if you were a ghost I could imagine you getting up a fine variety of dim, semi-transparent costumes—zephyrs, nun's-veiling, eh, Lucy?'

'Don't!' said Lucy, with a jerk of her shoulders and a gasp of pain and fright. 'I wonder you are not frightened, Celia. You know there was really such a person as the—the Spanish Madam: Mr. Fielding told us about her. If we believe the Bible she is somewhere still; she cannot have passed entirely away, like a dried-up drop of water or a blown-away particle of sand,' stammered Lucy, borrowing her similes from her flower-stand.

'Or a lost pin,' put in Celia.

'She may be near us,' went on Lucy shudderingly, too

shudderingly for her to heed her sister. 'Oh! are you not frightened that she may not come at any moment in very deed and punish you?'

'No, my dear, I have a clearer conscience than you can have,' said Celia, with audacious composure. 'I have never declined to own that she may have been hereabouts all the time, and may be honouring us with a few calls and strolls just to keep herself in practice. I have never said that ghost stories are all foolish fibs or malicious tricks. It is you whom she will punish for so obstinately scouting her very existence as a walking ghost, like the walking gentleman in a company of stage-players. Oh, Lucy! I am surprised at you that you do not take guilt to yourself and shrink from the consequences.'

Lucy did not answer. She knew that she was no match for Celia, and she hoped that the conversation would drop, but Celia was not tired of it yet.

'I do think, Lucy,' she resumed, 'it is very unkind of the Spanish Madam not to patronise me a little bit—her own lineal descendant. She rather slights her descendants, Jem and you and me, not to have made a point of being seen by one of us. It is not fair of her—a lack of natural affection—if natural affection extends to the sixth or seventh generation. Suppose she has anything to say, she had better say it to one of us than to a stranger—as a rule the Endicott family secrets are not fit to be told to everybody, are they? But, by-the-bye, it seems a special feature in her case that she has evidently no remark to make except on that trite subject the weather—of course she might say the English moorland air is cold to anybody. But think of her returning from another world to tell you that! You and she could sympathise in your antipathy to the moor, which I have grown to like passably well. It offers such a nice wide field for adventures and escapades, and one can vanish on it after the fashion of Pepper's ghost—another ghost! Now your antipathy may be hereditary, only I am not sure that with you it comes from the father's side of the house. You are a very sympathetic puss; you sympathise all round. There is no saying where your susceptibilities will land you.'

Lucy had been wincing again and again, but she braced herself up at this, and said angrily, 'I don't think you need be afraid for me. There is more occasion for you to look after yourself.'

'I am glad to find you are so courageous,' Celia retorted scornfully. 'As for me, I entertain no apprehension of dead ghosts appearing on the scene; much harm they would do! Why, it must be the greatest comfort to be positively certain that one's skeletons are safely dead and buried. It is the living ghosts that my gorge rises at. There are some faces which, if they are alive still, I confess I should not be able to look at and contain myself. It is the people who do not know whether their

skeletons are dead and buried, or whether they may not appear clad in horrid flesh and blood one day, who live with a sword hanging over their heads. Imagine a knock coming to the door one fine morning, and, Sally Beaver being out, you or I pocketing our gentility and going and answering the knock, and there finding——'

'Oh! Celia, Celia, hold your tongue,' besought Lucy.

'Well, then, rather than such an awkward encounter, you would not mind meeting the Spanish Madam in her own person,' Celia returned to her malicious mischief. 'I predict she will come to you next, on some stormy afternoon or rainy night when you are not thinking of her, as you are hurrying back from the lanes or in from the garden. Perhaps, when you are in the dark passage which leads to our bedroom, she will steal up behind you and you will give a terrified glance over your shoulder though you are so brave, and you will catch the faint outline of her long black cloak and the lace about her head and face, hanging over her forehead and binding up her chin like the chin of a dead woman. You will see enough to distinguish that she is making horrible faces at you, but for your life you will not be able to tell whether she is the genuine Spanish Madam, or—what shall we say? a skilful representation of that single-minded and obliging woman.'

'You are cruel, cruel,' moaned Lucy, hastening to gather up her scattered possessions and beat a precipitate retreat before the enemy, followed by Celia's mocking laughter. 'You are so cruel that I almost believe you are mad.'

When was that desperate explanation of cruelty—for which there is no sufficient motive assignable—first made by a tortured victim, and how much truth lies in it? What are the clear definitions between some kinds of radical badness, either purposeless or with so slender a purpose that it does not count, and latent madness? Is there not always a strain of madness in wilful, wanton infliction of pain, unless the inflictor be an ignorant, irresponsible child? and even in his or her case the peculiarity is ominous either of a very low or of an imperfect type of humanity. When did devilish possession cease? Are there not remnants of it still in the unhappy struggling lives of those who have lucid or free moments, but are habitually souls dwelling in exile and outlawry from all the purer, nobler, kindlier influences of nature and grace? When will the Christ come again with great power to reign and cast out on the right hand and on the left, with open might and majesty, the raging devils of drink, uncleanliness, greed, pride insolent as that of a fallen angel, jealousy cruel as the grave, envy which distorts and corrupts every mental faculty?

CHAPTER XXIV.

GEORGE FIELDING INQUIRES INTO THE RESTLESSNESS OF THE SPANISH MADAM.

To Jem Endicott's disgust, George Fielding was sufficiently interested in the story of the appearances at Blackhall and Oxcleeve to come over from Ashford to discuss them at leisure, as he would have discussed any natural physical phenomena.

'Idle men are glad of the idlest occupation,' said Jem, with a rudeness born of his cumbered, harassed life. 'I have never had any reason to accuse you of idleness before, Fielding, but either your business must be leaving you, or you must be leaving it to your clerks.'

'Leave that to me, Jem,' said George Fielding cheerfully. 'A ghost is interesting, and one does not have the opportunity of investigating him or her every day, though the species is not nearly so rare as it was wont to be. Now here am I, a wholly impartial person, and I take my stand on my impartiality, willing to believe anything or nothing so that it will but prove itself feasible to my legal faculties. I am ready to admit that disembodied spirits may revisit the earth after we have taken for granted that they have left it finally. They may find means or have power given them—a more respectable way of putting it—to make their presence visible as a conscious fact to their former fellow-mortals. There is no absolute reason against it, though I am bound to say that generally speaking, and notably with regard to the Spanish Madam, there is still less reason for it. Still the subject of popular superstition is interesting, as I said, and one ought not to miss a good chance of investigating it in what are beginning to be once more ghost-ridden days. Will you not lend me your help?'

Jem flatly and disdainfully refused, and George let him go to wander among his sheep and cattle, and suspect that this beast had got 'the staggers' or that 'the rot.' But the horror of horror was a doubtful sign of rinderpest imported with the last herd. It must be kept secret as state treason, and stamped out by Jem and Beaver—meeting by appointment, stealthily and under cloud of night in the loneliest hollow within a circuit of miles, and there slaying and hiding the infected carcasses of the victims.

If Jem stayed in the house, he buried himself in that heap of accounts which were never any nearer being cleared up. He kept fingering and examining bills and promissory notes, as if to look at them every day and half a dozen times a day, with eyes growing always more dazed and lack-lustre in the looking, would help to meet their obligations when they fell due.

George Fielding was heartily sorry for the hard-bested, direly matter-of-fact young squire, and he did not for a moment suspect him of collusion with the ghost. Jem Endicott might be stupid and surly, but he was honest to the backbone.

At least Jem offered no obstacle, though he declined to afford any assistance to Fielding in his researches, which he proceeded to go about in a systematic manner. He interviewed in turn most of the ghost-seers, beginning with Zecchy and Lovey and ending with the Beavers—after all it was only an afternoon's work. He took mental notes of their evidence, and classified it as follows.

Zecchy and Lovey only saw or supposed they saw it from their windows. They might have been dreaming of old stories. There is nothing more to be got out of them than oracular shakes of the head, and 'us dood zee she, plain as father and mother spoke on her, in her murning cloak and her furrin pinners about the head and feace on her.' The single question is why Zecchy and Lovey—if they took to dreaming, as was highly probable, of old stories—happened both to do it, and that almost simultaneously. For it was on the same night, within an hour or so, that the ghost appeared to each separately. It is possible they have forgotten, and one told the other the bootless fable, while the recipient of the tale fancied that there was a repetition of it for his or her separate benefit, and, getting more and more confused, antedated the occurrence so as to render it contemporaneous with the neighbour's report.

Mrs. Wayland saw it in the open air nearly a week afterwards. She is a much younger person, and could not have been very familiar with the old story. Still she acknowledges that she had been told what Zecchy and Lovey believed they had seen, though she insists that she was not thinking of it at the time of the appearance. She was fully engaged 'shooing' a refractory 'geuse,' and was much taken aback and startled by the figure on the opposite side of the hedge. The hour was later than that which Zecchy and Lovey fix upon for the date of their apparition. In fact, it was latish twilight, when a willow bough looks like a gaunt arm, and a scarecrow is taken for one's long-lost brother. But Patty says there was still light enough to see by, and people were about Well-head. Mr. Tony North had just passed when Patty was beginning to marshal her geese.

John Polglase, three nights afterwards, had of course heard what had happened to Zecchy and Lovey and to Mrs. Wayland, but certainly did not expect to meet a ghost on the hill 'along of the Birches.' It went off the footpath (which was suspicious) and walked among the furze bushes and the boulders, yet he could see it quite distinctly. He could not believe his senses (it is to be hoped they were sober senses—he has not the reputation of drinking, except at Christmas or at a fair or a marriage feast). He made bold to challenge the thing, 'Who be you?

What's a doing here? Be'st lost among the ztumps and ztones and bracken?'

The only answer it gave was to shiver and spread out its hands, which it began to do after he spoke (suspicious again). The second time it passed him, coming the other way, it brushed by him so that he could have caught hold of it. Didn't think it was unsubstantial like thin air; certainly felt it touch him, and his dog sniffed at it. Dog showed no alarm, neither did it—a point in its favour, that is in favour of its genuineness as a ghost. Dogs are not infallible, and for anything one knows may have ceased to howl at ghosts; but hardly any impostor, especially any female impostor, would not shrink from the too unceremonious and intimate advances of a Devonshire sheep-dog. Have myself seen John Polglase's dog—a formidable animal to a woman, bigger than an ordinary new-born calf and as grey as an old rat or bear. It was too late for people to be out on the hill, unless they were farm people, moor-men or shepherds. He had seen one sportsman with his gun and bag going home in the distance. As far as John could make out, 'it were parson's idle gentleman cousin.' (What, Tony North again! a decided case of ghostly preference for the scamp and ne'er-do-well. Could he be guilty of personifying the poor, innocent, chilly Spanish Madam? He was, apart from his dislike to taking trouble in any fashion, capable of an impudent, unprincipled imposture. But there was no conceivable end to be served unless to give Tony more cause, metaphorically, to thrust his tongue into his cheek. Besides, on second thoughts, the vulgar imposture presented all but insuperable difficulties, unless the inquisitor were ready to give Tony the credit of the skilled legerdemain and instantaneous change of character of all the wizards of the north and south shaken into one.)

George Fielding took the Beavers last on his list. Both husband and wife had seen the Spanish Madam several times—once in the early morning—on other occasions close upon dusk or not long after it. The husband and wife did not go about their work together, though latterly Sally, in spite of her complacence, had expressed considerable disinclination to fetch firewood or a broom unattended, therefore they had never seen the Spanish Madam in company, and naturally they had not found presence of mind to bar its passage in the house over which it had once been mistress, or even, like John Polglase, to hail it. Indeed, the last time Sally had seen the ghost she had been so 'skeared' as to have something like a 'swound,' while she said every time Beaver had faced the same ordeal cold sweat had broken upon him, though he refused to own it. The older part of the house of Blackhall was not, even on the ground-floor, a route to any of the more modern inhabited rooms, as Lady Jones's former brewery and present laundry led to her back garden. The Spanish Madam must come there to fright the Beavers, and for nowt

else, save that it might wish to be spoken to. Everybody knew no ghosteses spoke first, and the Rev. North was the fit person to tackle it. Spanish Madam was always a-bowing of itself and a-didderin' like a leaf, a-spreading out its white hands zo pitiful like, when the Beavers saw it. Asked if the hands were really white or yellowish, a dark ivory or a light coffee-colour, the witness answered unhesitatingly lily-white, the same as any other gentlewoman's hands. Asked if it was tall, answered none so tall. She were shrunk together, to be sure; but Beaver, who was more exact in his statements than his wife could be made, and was besides accustomed to measure inches in animals, defined the Spanish Madam's height as certainly not above Miss Lucy's. (That disposes of the hypothesis of Tony North's making himself up for the ghost.)

A wild idea crossed George's mind. Could Kitty Carew be playing the ghost, and Jem conniving at it to suit his book? But Fielding dismissed the notion the next minute as utterly untenable, even more so than the fleeting fancy that Tony North might have the bad taste to lend himself to the buffoonery. Such a proceeding was widely removed from Kitty's cast of character, her standard of morals, her position and antecedents.

Then, having for his own satisfaction examined the ghost-seers, George went in for afternoon tea in the absence of the master of the house, and proceeded a little more cautiously and less directly to examine those who had not seen the ghost.

Celia had not the slightest objection to be interviewed: she answered each question volubly as he put it to her. She volunteered a good deal of information and speculation on ghosts in general, in the peculiar glib gibing manner which he disliked in the girl.

Lucy showed the utmost reluctance to say a word, and scarcely opened her mouth. Her distressed shyness, in the room of the friendly prattle which she used to address to him, put him out in his turn, to Celia's unconcealed diversion.

'This girl knows something about it,' George was telling himself in a puzzled, vexed way; 'and ten to one the other guesses that her sister knows. What can she know? It is positively a disreputable game for a girl like her to have to do with in any shape. It may only be that she believes in the appearances, and is ashamed of her belief; but I suspect there is more in it than that.'

Till now George Fielding had been considerably amused in penetrating this out-of-the-way, mysterious corner of human experience. His shrewd face, with the candour of which he had been inclined to boast, had been lit up with quizzical fun as well as judicial acuteness.

But now he began to look grave and worried. He regretted that he had started the inquiry. He could not give up this simple, dutiful Lucy as he had found her and liked her, with the

celerity and ease which Mrs. Reynolds would have displayed in branding Mrs. Endicott's daughter as a deceitful, artful girl under her quiet demeanour, full of folly and fastness and all manner of little-worth schemes and disgraceful tricks. On the other hand, the only other conclusion left him pointed to a distempered brain and a morbid imagination. He recalled all the remarkable examples of hysteria which he had come across in his reading, rather than in the practice of his profession, all the stories of sleep-walkers, kleptomaniacs, fasting girls, deluded and deluding, blending themselves together in his memory in unwholesome and disastrous combination. He went back to the middle ages and contemplated a grievous category of bewitched victims and nuns tormented by St. Vitus or something worse. Like most thoroughly healthy-minded men and women, he had a strong aversion to such abnormal developments and subtle mysteries. He would sooner have encountered all the ghosts in creation than have met with what was to him a still more baffling and tragic sequel. Who would have thought it of this mild specimen of humanity, this apparently good little girl? What was to become of the miserable girl if she had persuaded herself to play the ghost merely to terrify and torment her neighbours? Was she like Mrs. Siddons when she played Lady Macbeth and Queen Katherine, so carried away by her own rampant imagination—diseased in this instance—that she ceased to be herself for the time? Was Lucy Endicott lost in the Spanish Madam from the moment that Lucy personated her ancestress? He wished with all his heart that he had never told the Endicotts the story, sitting in that very sitting-room at Blackhall, and so started one of them on this mad career. But how could he foresee such a wretched, ghastly conclusion from so simple a beginning? Were the misfortunes of the family never to end? and what was this new grotesquely horrible thing which had befallen them? Did the girl not quite know what she was doing? Was she helped by the unconsciousness as well as the cunning of madness in the strange unaccountable proceeding? Was it possible to believe her either bad or mad, sitting there busy dabbling in some woman's work, as usual, with such an air of girlish sincerity and modesty about her? He had known her unhappy mother, but she would never have been capable of such conduct. He had known Joanna, but you might as well have accused her of lying and stealing. If he were right in his suspicions, what step *would* he be called on to take in the painful business?

George Fielding was glad of an interruption to his troubled thoughts. It came in the shape of Lady Jones driving up to the porch while he was still sitting with his teacup in his hand.

Lucy was the first to see the visitor and to start up to welcome her and bring her in. Lady Jones came in looking white and nervous, as she was apt to do when she entered a

room in which several people were congregated, but with an eager questioning look in her grey eyes. She never failed to present a highly suggestive study to Fielding, and he was willing to be diverted by it from his earlier investigations, which had not to say palled on him; he felt as if they had burned his fingers pretty smartly, and were likely to lead him where he did not care to go.

But Lady Jones was also full of the ghost story. She began upon it the moment she had sat down, without the formality of a preface, before Lucy could spur on Sally Beaver to send in fresh tea. Her ladyship did not seem either to see or heed the discomposure of her special friend in the family while she thus meddled in their private affairs. She showed almost as little tact as Mrs. Reynolds could have displayed when she began: 'What is this I hear about a ghost at Blackhall? Is it a fact that anybody has been annoying you by playing so stale and impertinent a trick? What is the true story?' But even in Lady Jones's most abrupt utterances there was an earnest wistful friendliness to her landlord's family never to be discovered in Mrs. Reynolds's animadversions.

It was Celia who replied, while Lucy kept repeating her offers of sugar, cream, and bread and butter in the most inconsequent, agitated manner. Celia said airily, 'Oh dear! has our ghost travelled as far as the Court, Lady Jones? Well, after all it shows it to be a well-informed ghost, correct in its data; for I believe that first when the Court belonged to us Endicotts it became for a time a dowager-house; did it not, Mr. Fielding? It may have been so in the days of the Spanish Madam; you will know,' appealing with an affectation of profound deference to George. 'The ghost may only have been revisiting one of its various residences in the body. When did you see it, may I ask?'

Lady Jones was unlike Lucy Endicott in having a taste for ghost stories; she was still more unlike poor Lucy in not being intimidated and driven desperate by the idea of having to receive and entertain a spirit pure and simple. 'It has not been near me,' she said with an indifference that had some scorn in it. 'But pardon me, I came to put and not to answer questions. I wish to ascertain from you, if you will allow me, the beginning and end of this ghost story.'

'I hope you may,' said Celia, with a light laugh. 'But you will be a clever woman if you do. The truth is, it has neither beginning nor end. The Spanish Madam, or somebody bearing a resemblance to her, who walked forty or fifty years ago, as collectors of foolish stories report,' with a mocking glance at George Fielding, 'walks again, by an eccentricity of taste, about the disused and half-ruinous quarters of this house. She may be there now, for anything I can tell. Would you like to go and see?' ended Celia defiantly.

'Yes, I should like to go,' said Lady Jones without a moment's hesitation, getting up, putting down her cup, and opening the room door which was just behind her before George Fielding could anticipate her. She passed out into the corridor and took the opposite direction to that leading to the hall and the front door.

'Oh! don't go there, Lady Jones,' besought Lucy, in tones shrill and tremulous with more than one kind of terror. 'That is the way to the old rooms; but you will not be able to find it: some of the windows of the corridor are boarded up, so that it is half dark. There are rats and bats—I never go there—and there are steps up and steps down which may trip you and give you a bad fall.'

Lady Jones went on undeterred. Instinctively the others followed in a body. Celia did not care to conceal her surprise and resentment, though she had given the invitation, not dreaming that it would be accepted. Lucy was trembling in every limb. Fielding was occupied with a new and overwhelming perplexity.

Lady Jones did not move quickly, that was impossible for her, but her determination nerved her, so that she trod more firmly. Her tall figure was erect with a freedom of poise which might have belonged to it in the vigour of her youth. For the moment she had risen above her infirmity. There was no occasion for Lucy to scream out, 'Take care, Lady Jones, you are coming to a step,' though they had already passed one boarded window in the resounding emptiness of the corridor, and the light was growing dim. Lady Jones's foot took the step without any fumbling or groping, and proceeded as before.

It was George Fielding walking after her, abreast of the two girls, who suddenly came to a dead stop with a muffled adjuration. 'Good Lord!' he said.

'What is it?' cried Celia sharply.

'Oh, Mr. Fielding, what is it?' implored Lucy as both stopped. But Lady Jones was so intent in her pursuit of occult knowledge that she neither heard nor turned her head, nor missed the others as she continued her course.

'Good heavens!' repeated George hoarsely, and the healthy hue of his dark face ebbed to a pallor that for the instant rivalled Lady Jones's paleness.

'Have *you* seen a ghost?' demanded Celia in the utmost impatience and disdain.

'Yes, I have,' he ejaculated, with a smothered groan; then he made a violent effort to recover the mastery over himself, and hastily, 'No. Don't mind what I said.'

'Come back, come back,' wailed Lucy. 'Call after Lady Jones, and perhaps she will listen to you and turn back. What will become of her if she goes on alone and there is something

dreadful in the place? I must try to overtake her, though I feel as if I should go out of my wits.'

'Don't be an idiot, Lucy. I think you are all going out of your wits. What ailed you, Mr. Fielding? Did you feel ill?'

'I suppose so,' said George, in a subdued, stupefied voice. 'One cannot be always well, can one? Let us—let us follow Lady Jones. Don't alarm yourself, Miss Lucy, there is nothing more dreadful in the place than ourselves. No harm will happen to Lady Jones; she is able to find her way.'

'She must be like a cat, then, she must see in the dark,' said Celia, with her scoffing laugh.

Lady Jones had reached the last of the disused rooms, and was standing in the middle of Beaver's tools and Sally's fagots when the others joined her. She was crushing up something in her hand, which she put into her pocket before anybody could see it, without farther explanation than the calm cutting announcement, 'There is certainly no ghost here at present, and if ever one comes again, I undertake to prove that it is quite a modern ghost, a fraudulent flesh-and-blood ghost.'

She was so engrossed by her statement that she did not notice any change in George Fielding, who hung back and made no remark. Celia said with a drawl, 'We are much obliged to your ladyship.' Lucy cried in a jumble of eager, contradictory asseverations that she was glad and she was sorry—she meant sorry that there had been any question of a ghost, though she was convinced none would ever come again; and she was glad on that account, and because nothing had happened to Lady Jones, who had behaved so courageously and unselfishly. Even while Lucy spoke she was glancing about fearfully among the hoes, scythes, and piled-up wood.

'Don't be too sure, Lucy,' said Celia in open derision.

George Fielding did not hear them, he had not heard Lady Jones. He was failing to notice how Lucy behaved under the test. He had actually forgotten all about the Spanish Madam, except in reference to one person. What had happened to him had the curious effect of rendering him sarcastic like Celia Endicott, only it was secretly, not openly. 'Find her way!' he was saying to himself, 'I should think so, in her father's house. Why, she bears the very name of the Spanish woman, though she derived it directly from her father's mother, and might not have been acquainted with its origin. There were worse troubles than Spanish madams here in her day. If anybody has the right to challenge the impostor it is she, and I should not like to be the guilty person who came across her. There is nothing in the foolish story the Oxcleeve rustics have been setting about, unless the hysteric craze of a girl; but there is a ghost of a different sort among them if they only knew it. How terribly she must have suffered to be so altered that none could recognise her after fifteen or twenty years—is it twenty or fifteen? I could have

sworn when I was a young fool that, though everybody except me had forgotten her and been deceived in her, I must have known her anywhere, at any time; and I had not the faintest idea of her identity till this afternoon! What martyrdom she must be enduring to this hour—for what purpose she only knows. Women are fond of inflicting martyrdom on themselves; at least, I have been told so, for I seem to have lost my bearings. What cruel, barbarous things I too have said to her about her father, about herself—I who was ready to swear in my calf days that if I had my will she should never again hear a rough or an unkind word!'

Like a man in a dream George Fielding went back with his companions to the sitting-room, and heard Lady Jones say good-bye to him and the others. He even went down with her to her pony-carriage, and put her into it with hands which he had a disturbed perception that he could not keep from trembling, though nobody save himself noticed it.

Why should he be so moved? This woman was doubtless what she represented herself to be, the widow of Sir Benjamin Jones, formerly the governor of a colony in Australia. He could see for himself that she was a white-haired, infirm woman. He had nothing to do with her, unless as Jem Endicott's agent. She was a woman totally apart from any other woman he had ever known or been interested in. She was also a woman in independent circumstances, who could take care of herself, and evidently only wanted to be let alone.

Still in a maze, Fielding went back into the house and took leave of Celia and Lucy, refusing to wait for Jem's return. When he got home to Ashford he ate doggedly through his dinner, as became a man of his years, in order to recover his balance and to satisfy himself that he was not too much put out. It was also the best means to get rid of his servant's observation with the least trouble.

Then George shut himself up from interruption, and set himself to review the position, walking up and pacing down his handsome, heavily furnished old dining-room as the Lord of Burleigh paced his hall.

He came to the conclusion that it was not for him to identify a woman who, though he could not say that she had attempted any farther personal disguise than the great and grievous changes which time and trouble had wrought in her, certainly had not sought identification from him or from anybody else.

How had Jem and his sisters failed to know her in spite of herself? It sounded very extraordinary, but when George Fielding thought it over he took into account that Jem could not have been more than eleven or twelve years of age at the date of the last holidays which he had spent at home, when he had last seen Joanna. The schoolboy had been fond of his big

sister, nearly ten years his senior, as Fielding remembered; but Jem had never been observant whether as boy or man, and the alteration in her had been enough to baffle older and clearer sighted people. As for Celia and Lucy, they had been mere babies of six or seven when Joanna went away; they could not, unless from some of those mystic thrills of blood which poets are fond of chronicling, have possibly recognised their sister. All the old servants had been gone from the place for many a day; and with regard to the old villagers and old neighbours like Greg Barnes, who were less familiar with her than the Blackhall household had been, there was the great, incalculable change to blind and numb their senses. What was there to wonder at when he who had been her lover, honestly devoted to her in his youth, had utterly missed such lingering traces of the girl of fifteen years ago as might have enlightened him?

The Joanna Endicott whom George Fielding remembered to have compared in her depth and glow of colour to the Nut-brown Maid, and in the splendid energy and vigour of her fine physique to Diana the huntress-goddess, this white-haired, wan-faced woman who crept and tottered about like a woman of seventy or eighty! It was not only inexpressibly pitiful, it was incredible even yet.

He did not see what good would be done, or how it could work anything save harm and pain, for him to come forward and reveal the secret which she had not chosen to impart to her nearest kindred. In like manner he could not see why she had come back at all, at this distant date, unless it were in obedience to the irresistible craving and longing which draws many a poor exile from his adopted country, that yet contains all the compensation which the world holds for him, back to his native land, though he knows beforehand it has for him only dust and ashes, it bears no crop which he can reap save the retributive growth of briars and thorns.

Nobody knew what her history had been in the interval, though she might have done well for herself in the end. He was willing, he had always been willing, to believe her incapable of worse than what came to light. He had judged her mercifully. But he was aware that nine-tenths of the world would think differently. He knew that when a woman takes a false step there is seldom the possibility of her retracing it. A prodigal son may turn from the error of his ways and be welcomed back, not merely by his father, but by the whole circle of his friends and acquaintances; but such grace is not granted to a prodigal daughter whose own father has condemned her, even though her prodigality has had its limits and has not been without excuse.

It might be said that she had so far retrieved her error as to prosper in the world, and that she was willing others should profit by her *prosperity*; but would they consent to be so

prospered, or if they consented would it be for their real lasting advantage?

The question did not rest with him, he was thankful. Let her take her own way, as she was tolerably certain to do in any case, without hindrance or furtherance from him.

Intercourse with her, even the slight and superficial intercourse which it had been her will to establish between the old friends hitherto, would be extremely difficult for him now that he had seen through a millstone, now that he had solved the riddle; but it could not be worse or half so bad for him than it must have been for her all along. She had been a woman of quick, passionate feelings, which had not been crushed out of her, as he had already had sufficient proof now that he held the clue by which he could understand her sayings and doings. Ye gods! to think of her entering Blackhall as a stranger, meeting her own brother and sisters as common acquaintances, listening to the public verdict on one and all of them, on her old self—Joanna—who had been so shy, proud, and self-sufficing! How could a woman voluntarily put herself into such a purgatory, or having put herself how could she remain in it? He could not bear to think of it.

CHAPTER XXV.

NOTHING TO PAY.

George Fielding had seen a ghost on his own account which had driven the other Blackhall ghost entirely out of his mind, but by an odd coincidence there was a sudden entire cessation of the Spanish Madam's appearances after his visit. To the immense relief of Lucy Endicott especially the unaccounted-for marvel gradually dropped out of village gossip, until it was possible even for the most susceptible persons to walk across their goose greens in the twilight and into the lumber-rooms of their houses after nightfall or in the early morning without their adventurous hearts coming into their mouths. The world of everyday life was again in the ascendant. Common things reasserted their supremacy.

Lucy Endicott was one of those persons who always know and remember their friends' birthdays, and are always ready with little offerings to commemorate them—offerings which may have cost the donor a great deal of time and trouble, but which are unfortunately often neither so appropriate nor so opportune as to awaken the gratitude they clearly deserve, unless, indeed, the recipient be an individual of an exceptionally gracious and grateful temper.

Lucy was the only person at Blackhall who kept a record of

other people's birthdays in addition to the birthday of the recorder. She recollected Jem's birthday in the month of August so many weeks before the anniversary that she was supplied in time with the necessary gift, and had primed herself to present it, together with a sisterly kiss and a neat little speech expressive of her good wishes for many happy returns of the day.

Now, if Jem did not exactly follow the examples of the patriarch Job and Dean Swift in cursing the hour in which his mother had brought a man-child into the world, he came perilously near to it on this morning in early autumn, when circumstances were bringing home to him with a force which they had not hitherto possessed that in spite of his frantic efforts he was a ruined man past remedy. He was neither the style of man nor in the condition of mind to look up blandly, and smilingly acknowledge the kind attention of one of the sisters who hung on his exhausted resources, after the nature of parasites, and were assisting in stifling him by their close embrace.

Lucy tripped into the sitting-room the moment after Jem had entered it. She advanced to bestow her congratulatory salute and a pair of scarlet slippers fit for a cardinal on her brother, who never wore slippers, and if he had worn them must have kept them at the 'Furze Bush,' as that was his retreat, the only place where he sought rest and recreation.

Jem turned half his cheek away from her lips, which was the next thing to shaking her off, lent a sardonic ear to her felicitations, gingerly touched the slippers, and as it were sniffed at them.

'Better keep them to sell, if anybody will give money for such humbug,' growled Jem. 'I'm obliged to you, Lucy, but I shan't want a pair of baby's red shoes to tramp the country in search of employment. The price might get a night's lodging for you and Celia.'

'Oh, Jem! what do you mean?' cried Lucy, as much aghast as if he had not cried 'wolf' before, and that rather too often. 'Of course I should never think of selling my work for money, even though you did not like it. Do you not like it, Jem? I am so sorry, for I meant particularly to please you. I do not care for glaring colours as a rule, you may know that,' said Lucy, with returning complacency, glancing round at the grey-greens and green-greys of her mats and cushions; 'but men are different. I believe most of them like bright colours, just as they always want a great deal of light. I thought this red was so nice and cheerful; I had some difficulty in getting the shade of morocco to match it, but I thought I had managed pretty well,' ended Lucy wistfully, putting her head on one side and contemplating the despised slippers.

He knew he was speaking like a brute. He had even a distinct impression that Kitty would tell him so if she ever heard

of it, and sharply rebuke him to his face for his unkindness to his sister; but he could not resist the temptation of giving vent to his irritation. 'Cheerful!' he protested, catching at the most offensive word; 'a man is likely to be cheerful when there is every chance of the bailiffs being in possession next week.'

'Bailiffs!' cried Lucy, much as she would have screamed 'lions and tigers!' 'I thought bailiffs came to seize furniture I am sure there would be very little to seize here,' looking round her in dismay. 'But perhaps you mean the bailiffs are coming to some other man than yourself, and some other place than Blackhall.'

'No,' said Jem, 'and there is precious little stuff, as you say,' with a bitter laugh. 'The place was effectually cleared out before.'

'So little,' said Lucy, with her dewy, pleading eyes fixed piteously on his face, 'that I don't fancy it is worth a sale. Oh, Jem! you will never allow them to have another sale here? Why, we should not have beds to lie down in, or chairs to sit upon. No creditors could be so hard as that.'

'You had better wait and see,' answered Jem grimly, 'or you may try what you can do to persuade them to wait till doomsday; I cannot engage to meet their claims any sooner, unless I am an arrant liar, as well as a bankrupt like—like my father,' Jem told her, as he stamped out of the room.

Lucy in her perturbation, still holding the rejected cardinal's slippers in her hand, had recourse to Celia, who was still in the sisters' bedroom, not farther advanced in her toilet than was implied by her sitting in her dressing-jacket before the shabby mirror, brushing out her hair.

'Oh, Celia, the bailiffs are coming next week! Jem says so,' gasped Lucy.

'The bailiffs instead of the Campbells—you don't say so!' remarked Celia, as coolly as she was in the habit of taking family matters. 'However, that does not warrant you in standing between me and the light. I can't say I did not expect it, for it is like our ill-luck and Jem's shockingly bad management—working like a ploughman or a shepherd, but without a head to keep up appearances, carry off his position, and compel credit. *Will* you stand out of my light, Lucy?' for Lucy in her distress was fidgeting all over the room.

'I beg your pardon,' said Lucy humbly. 'But where would be the good of imposing upon tradespeople and getting more credit when Jem says he cannot pay what he owes already till doomsday?'

'These are just the circumstances when credit comes in most conveniently,' said Celia, with her tone of high-handed superiority; 'that is the use of credit. There would be no such thing, of course, if people paid their way; but there are people who can get on quite comfortably on credit all their lives, if they only

know how to put a good face on things, and never yield an inch to their creditors. Of course the debtors pay a little sometimes; otherwise credit is as good as a bank account. It is a pity that Jem and you are so stupid and silly.'

'But what will the bailiffs do?' asked Lucy anxiously, not particularly edified by this view of debtor and creditor.

'What do ogres do, my dear? you ought not to be so ignorant. Call the house their castle, and range all over it; ring perpetually for mutton chops—I hope they may get them!—drink gin and water in the drawing-room—we may as well call the sitting-room a drawing-room as anything else—with their chairs tilted back, and the bailiffs' feet on the chimneypiece or the window-sill. That is what they always do in novels.'

'But they cannot have mutton chops unless a sheep is killed, or somebody is at the market in Ashford; Jem does not drink gin and water; and we have really no drawing-room, I am sorry to say.'

'That won't signify, you goose. No doubt the bailiffs will accommodate themselves to our unusual circumstances. You need not trouble on their account.'

'I am not troubling about them, I am thinking of ourselves. What are we to do?' urged Lucy, pressing the heels and toes of the scarlet slippers convulsively together, as a substitute for wringing her hands.

'Submit, of course; who ever heard of anybody except mad people opposing bailiffs? If we did we should simply bring down the law on our heads, in addition to our other little cares. No, speak them fair; that is the most approved tactics. Perhaps if one of them has a foot of the same size as Jem's—and Jem is a good deal of an elephant in that respect—it might be worth while for you to bestow on him these magnificent Turk's slippers, rejected of the polite Jem as I told you they would be.'

'Celia, how could you ever propose such a thing?' demanded Lucy in the height of injured feeling, her pink cheeks flaming till they were of nearly as sanguine a hue as the bone of contention. 'Jem's slippers and my work to be degraded by being given to a bailiff!'

'Compose yourself—I would not lose my temper if I were you. What would our excellent vicar think? It shall not have its dashing slippers wasted on a wretched bailiff, if it prefer that they should go to a creditor or to the worthy body of creditors. I am afraid there is not the choice left of presenting them to a clergyman. Besides, the design is not clerical—a small grey cat's head——'

'Grey cat's! it is a brown fox's head,' Lucy could not help crying out indignantly.

'Well, grey cat's or brown fox's head—it is all the same—on a red ground would not do when it is not a fox-hunting parson

who is in question. It ought to have been a large white cross on a foundation of Lent purple. Suppose the slippers were parted among the creditors so far as they would go—a heel to one and a toe to another, heels and toes to be made up into pocket pincushions. I have heard that men require pins occasionally. Or what do you say to a representation of the wife in the shoe, with Jem in the character of the wife and the creditors standing for her numerous offspring? One of our friends and patrons might like it as an ingenious allegory.'

'Celia, how can you talk such nonsense when—the bailiffs are coming?' said Lucy, with a sob, subsiding into a chair.

'Get up this instant, you are sitting on my bodice. The bailiffs are standing for the Campbells again, and yet I am not to be permitted to sing "Oho! oho!" It is you who are unreasonable, child. In the first place they are only coming—they have not come. How long have we been here?'

'Eighteen months,' said Lucy, sitting up and opening her eyes.

'Eighteen long weary months, or eighteen short delightful months, it does not much matter for what I am going to say. How often in these eighteen months has our candid Jem told us that he was on the brink of ruin? I should say twice a week on an average—roughly reckoned, one hundred and forty-four times. Still he has never gone over the brink. He is not ruined now, any more than when we came.'

'Well, that is true,' said Lucy reflectively. 'That is one comfort.'

'I should say it is. Another comfort is that the arrival of the bailiffs would merely be a signal of distress. They need not drive us out, though they are in. Luckily Blackhall is large enough—if the men only brought their own furniture—to hold us all, and Sally Beaver might still do for us, unless the legal gentry are exorbitant in their demands.'

'And who would pay for everything?' Lucy ventured to inquire. She had more housewifely instinct than Celia possessed, and was ten times as conscientious.

'I am not altogether clear on that point. I should say Jem, if he had anything to pay with. Perhaps it may be the creditor who pays the bailiffs to act as bull-dogs, thus cutting off his nose to spite his face—serve him right! But I don't know, and I really don't care, for I do not see how it concerns me—nobody can ask me to pay. After all, the bailiffs' entrance on the scene may have the good effect of softening somebody's heart to our unmerited misfortunes—some emotional family man, or high and dry bachelor who knew us in better days, like Fielding. By-the-bye, I am afraid he is getting an old woman, in spite of his pretence at youthful activity and lively interest in what is occupying other people's minds. The idea of his coming over, poking about here, and putting lawyer's questions with

reference to our unsubstantial ghost! Even your vicar, though he is a born schoolmaster, let that alone. But that is not what I was thinking of. Any creditor, melted to tears by the affecting thought of our being exposed to the constant society of bailiffs, may withdraw his claim and may persuade his fellow-creditors to go and do likewise. Or he may take Jem in hand again: though I must say I should not care to be the creditor. I have heard of bailiffs living years in a house, and everything going on just the same as when these objectionable persons were conspicuous by their absence. I won't swear that it was not in Ireland, or that Tony North did not make a good story out of it. However, it will be time enough for you to cry out when the bailiffs are here, and when they have confiscated all your precious pottering mats and cushions, your very personal property of work-basket, needles and thread, and thimble. What would become of you then, poor little dear?'

Lucy was a little quieted and reassured by Celia's mingled *sang-froid* and ridicule. But all the poor girl's fortitude was scattered to the winds by the receipt on her own part of a couple of business-like letters from Bliss, the principal Ashford draper, and Mrs. Denny the dressmaker. These worthy persons appeared to be acting in concert, as if they smelt in common the bailiffs on the wind. For the couple pointedly summoned Lucy to settle her small account at her earliest convenience; Bliss only adding, by an afterthought of forced civility, that he himself had a large bill coming due within a few days.

When a chance messenger brought the duns' craving epistles Jem was out, a circumstance for which Lucy could not be too thankful. She was alone; she had to put on her hat with trembling fingers and go out through the garden on to the moor to seek Celia, who was taking one of her constitutionals, in order to ask that Job's comforter and dangerous adviser, while Lucy was in an agony of helplessness, compunction, and fright, what she was to do in the strait. 'She will laugh at me,' moaned Lucy, as she stumbled in the direction first of one grey tor and then of another, so engrossed by her misery that she failed to see that some of her ordinary enemies, the cattle, were close to her, and might, had they so chosen, have made an end of her in no time. She was so blinded by her tears and the throbbing headache they brought on that she could not even distinguish Celia walking not very far off, and allowing herself, for her own amusement, to be passed twice at a little distance as if she had been a bush or a boulder.

At last Lucy was so exhausted that she was ready to drop at her temptress's feet and do abjectly whatever Celia deigned to suggest. As for profiting by the red flush of the heather, the golden glow of the furze, and the bracken already changing from green to russet, the whole brcught out in perfection by a dappled sky, making great flecks of light and shade, with a breezy air

stirring the long spikes of the foxglove, even the prickly arms of the brambles, Lucy knew nothing of what was around her. She was only sensible that her clothes were caught and torn, her very hands were pricked through her gloves, her weary feet were bruised by the uneven trackless ground, and by the stones she did not go out of her way to avoid. She might have been in the dull, smoke-laden, walled-in prison of a town garden with the greatest relief to her bodily sensations.

'She will laugh at me, and I dare not tell Jem when he is in such a humour and in such trouble himself,' was still the burden of Lucy's tale. 'Oh! what shall I do? Though I sold everything I have in the world—my school prizes and the presents the girls gave me, the bangles Uncle and Aunt Lowndes sent me the Christmas before last, and the ulster Aunt Lowndes bought me because she said it would be serviceable (it might be if I ever wore it; but I cannot do that, for it looks horrid—worse than a waterproof), I don't think I should get the money I owe—two pounds fifteen and two pounds five—for the whole of them. And how could I sell my things? Nobody buys old wardrobes at Oxcleeve; I don't believe that Sally, even if she would keep my secret, could dispose of mine. Oh dear! oh dear! I wish I had never done it. I might have gone and seen Jem drag Delaval Pool and been at Lady Jones's feast in my shabby old frock; or I might have stayed at home, though *he* did look as if he liked to have me there, and thought me nice in my new frock; but I have not worn it since, except at church, and of course he does not see how anybody looks in church, because he is much better engaged. What would he think if he knew my frock was not paid for, and that I bought it without telling Jem? I once heard Lady Jones say that she did not believe Mr. North would ever have college debts, like so many young men; she thought he must always have had so much self-control. I am afraid it was very wrong, very wicked of me; but I thought the stuff would not cost half so much, and I meant to be so clever and industrious in making it up myself. I wish—I wish I had done it, and then there would not have been Mrs. Denny's two pounds five, though I do not see how I could have paid the two pounds fifteen any more than the other money in addition. And it is Mr. Bliss who says that he has a large bill coming due. If he is not able to meet it, perhaps he will be ruined like Jem, and all for the want of my two pounds fifteen! Mr. Bliss has a wife and little children; I have seen them in the shop. What if he should run away, or—or do something dreadful to himself, and they have to go and beg and die of cold and hunger? Then I shall have killed them. I shall be guilty of murder as well as theft, for *he* said in one of his beautiful sermons that for a man not to keep his word in paying his debts is lying and stealing. I am sure poor Jem thinks so too, or he would not be so miserable. All to get a new frock; a thing I could have done without, though

I was very shabby, and I was happy when I wore it first. I think that was the happiest day in my life; but I wish—I wish I had any self-control.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FRIEND (OR FOE) IN NEED.

WISHES were of small avail after the deed was done, as many more than Lucy have found to their cost. When she did come up to Celia, sauntering along on a sheltered spot, Lucy was such a pitiable object that even Celia spared her for the moment.

'What have you been doing to yourself, you little goose? Are the bailiffs no longer coming, but come? I am sure they have not hurt a hair of your head, though they seem to have frightened you nearly out of your senses. Sit down on that stone opposite me, and recover your breath before you say a single word.'

Even after Lucy, in silent woe, had handed Celia the two bills—written on uncompromisingly plain blue paper, and enclosed in envelopes barren of ornament, without so much as Mr. Bliss's or Mrs. Denny's signature taking the place of a motto outside—Celia did nothing more disagreeable for a moment than toss her head and say, 'Tiresome, greedy creatures! They ought to be ashamed of themselves, though the total had been three times as much! If I were you, Lucy, I should be ashamed of having such a miserably small bill. Why, the one that Jem promised to pay for me, which was taken on in his name and handed over to him, of course, was ever so much more.'

'Oh, but you have not read Mr. Bliss's letter all through, cried Lucy sorrowfully. 'Don't you see he says he has a large bill coming due which he needs my money to meet? I am afraid, if he does not get it, he will be ruined too.' And Lucy's voice died away in a quaver of distress.

At last Celia threw back her head and laughed immoderately. 'Oh, you innocent—you gaby! don't you know that large bills requiring to be paid within a certain time are, like cheap sales and bankrupt stock, mere tools of trade? I put myself to the trouble once to ask somebody about Bliss's circumstances—not with regard to paying him, certainly, but because I wished to know whether he was in a position to get a respectable class of goods. I was told he was remarkably well-to-do. I should think he could lie out of a score of such pitifully small bills as yours for years, or for ever, without suffering the smallest inconvenience.'

'Then why does he write and tell stories about it?' asked Lucy in righteous indignation.

'Because the people here are such mean cads, as Tony North says,' answered Celia carelessly. 'Perhaps we showed Bliss our hand too plainly; or he may have recalled the fact that the last squire of Blackhall took the precaution of advertising in the Ashford newspaper that he would not be accountable for any debts contracted by his wife.'

Lucy hung her head, and made no reply.

The next moment the spirit of mad fun which gloried in tormenting a hapless victim, and gloated in the suffering thus inflicted, took possession of Celia. 'The question is not what will Bliss do, but what will you do, Lucy?' she began, with a capital assumption of grave sympathy. 'You must not be so disinterested—you must leave him to take care of himself; you must think of yourself. What is to become of you if he proceed to extremities? I need not say this account and Mrs. Denny's little bill are made out in your name; so that they cannot come on Jem for the money, they must come on you. A brother is not forced to pay his sister's debts, as a husband is forced to pay his wife's unless he has publicly repudiated them in the way which was once done here,' said Celia again, with perfect composure.

Lucy quailed and quivered anew, as she always did at these allusions, which were not so much allusions as taunts flung at her. One would have thought that any shame and pain thus wrought would have been shared by the sisters; but the strange morbid delight in stinging Lucy in her defencelessness took the sting from the taunt where Celia herself was concerned.

'The gist of the matter is,' Celia resumed her argument, 'the people to whom you are owing must come on you.'

'But I have nothing, Celia,' pleaded Lucy with imploring, panic-stricken eyes; 'you know I have only a few books and a trinket or two—my bangles and my locket, an old ring and brooch, the pencil-case Kate Bellew and Rose Powell gave me, and Marcia Anderson's fruit-knife. I believe that is all, except my clothes, and if they are taken I shall not be able to go out.'

'It is an awkward predicament,' said Celia, shaking her head. 'I suppose, when you have nothing, they will try to get at yourself.'

'How can they?' Lucy's shaking voice protested. 'What will they do to me?'

'I can't rightly say. People are not often sent to gaol for debt nowadays, because that costs more money; yet you may depend upon it their creditors get at them somehow. I think the first thing is to serve a writ on a defaulter.'

'What is serving a writ?' asked Lucy blankly, half below her breath, getting more and more appalled in her ignorance.

'I understand a sheriff's officer seeks you out, taps you on the shoulder generally, and gives you a paper summoning you to appear before a court of justice and show your poverty.'

Oh, Celia! I would die before I did that. You would never speak to me again; it would drive Jem mad. Would it get into the newspapers? Would everybody know?'

'No doubt, if by everybody you mean the neighbours here. The town of Ashford is not so very distant, neither is it so large as to cause the case of a young lady summoned for debt to be overlooked among the other interesting proceedings in its law court. I say, Lucy, it does not sound very respectable. We seem fated to be mixed up with what is not nice or becoming, and it is remembered and visited on us. You said something about my not speaking to you again. That is nonsense. I am your sister; but I am afraid not many people will care to acknowledge you much longer as an acquaintance. We have not been troubled with many acquaintances, but I suspect we shall have still fewer in time to come.'

'I wish I could die and get out of it,' said Lucy, with a gasping sigh. 'People might cease to say ill of me, and rather be sorry for me after I was dead. I wish I were fit to die; but I know I am not—far less so now than ever.'

'Don't talk stuff,' said Celia brusquely, with an unconfessed consciousness that she had gone far enough; 'don't talk in a manner only fit for some languishing sewing-girl or lackadaisical maid-of-all-work. What would you die for?' repeated Celia with contempt, 'unless to defraud those tradespeople, whom I suppose you mean to pay some day?'

'Yes, yes,' assented Lucy eagerly, 'if I only could find a way. Do you think if I went to them and said I was so sorry, and begged them to wait a little longer—for three months, only three months—they would listen to me?'

'And suppose they asked you what you expected to have at the end of three months that you do not have to-day?'

'I might find courage to tell Jem in the meantime. He might be getting on better and might help me,' said Lucy meekly.

'What, with the bailiffs coming next week and the news of their arrival all over Ashford, sure to be discussed both in Bliss's and Mrs. Denny's shops?'

Lucy groaned and began again timidly. 'If there were any one who could spare me the money—lending it to me and trusting that I should repay it when I could. Surely I shall have such a sum as that at my command some day,' cried Lucy, not without bitterness. 'But we have so few friends. I am afraid Uncle and Aunt Lowndes would not lend it to me. They would only be very angry with me for running into debt, and would tell Jem. I might try Mr. Fielding; he is quite old, I rather like him, and he has always been friendly with me. Oh, Celia, there is Lady Jones,' suddenly bethinking herself of her patroness. 'You will let me speak to her now, won't you? You will not object again? Very likely she will not approve,

for she is strict in some things; very likely she will scold me, for I have heard her speak her mind plainly even to you; but I believe she will let me have five pounds, and I shall be at peace once more.'

'How dare you propose such a thing?' demanded Celia, with her boasted equanimity suddenly giving way, while she blazed up into a fury, the virulence of which was in proportion to the rareness of the exhibition, though utterly out of keeping with the amount of provocation she had received. 'Tell your silly degrading story—for it is degrading not to have a penny you can call your own and yet to go and contract debt, however paltry—and then borrow money from that domineering madwoman, whom nobody knows anything about, who came and interfered and bullied me in my own home just because she was Jem's tenant and had laid out something on the Court, which nobody asked her to do! If you do, Lucy, I *will* never speak to you again. No; if you have to borrow money,' said Celia, calming down as rapidly as she had flamed up, for she prided herself on her coolness, and hated to be taken at the disadvantage of having 'flown into a rage,' 'I can manage for you without such an indignity. There is Tony North, for whom I am waiting here, since he promised to bring me some of his private supplies of light literature. He is not a favourite of yours or of the Oxcleeve world generally—you all turn up your sanctimonious noses at poor Tony—but you will find that he is the very friend to help you at such a pinch. I don't mean that I have ever availed myself of his services,' Celia stopped to explain loftily. '*I* can keep within my income of nothing a year, except of course with regard to what I really want and Jem is pledged to pay or be answerable for in some fashion. But Tony has often told me of banking for his lady friends. He is not a man, as he is ready to own, over-flush of cash, but neither is he ever without it. I make no question that he will advance you five pounds without saying or thinking anything about it. Men don't howl over these transactions as women do.'

'But I should not like to borrow money from Tony North,' said Lucy, shrinking back. 'He might not say anything about it, but he might make one feel it. I should not like to borrow money from any man. I am not sure that to do that would not be to treat Jem worse than to conceal an account from him.'

'Why, it was you yourself who suggested borrowing this money,' said Celia impatiently, 'and you mentioned a man, George Fielding, to whom you might apply.'

'But that was very different,' Lucy found courage to say. 'He has known us all our lives; he is old enough to be my father—nearly. He is a friend of Jem's; he has always been a friend of the family.'

'I don't see the great difference,' said Celia coldly. 'To be

a friend of Jem's is no recommendation when you wish to keep all knowledge of the affair from Jem. As to being a friend of the family,' she added with a sneer, 'when you will show me what great advantage the family have derived from the friendship, I may be able to set more value upon it. He is not the style of man to whom I should care to confide my little weaknesses and troubles—a cut-and-dry stick of a man, with an affectation of bachelor freedom and liberality. The truth is, Lucy, you have an objection to your tricks being told to a clergyman's cousin, an inmate of the Oxcleeve vicarage.'

'I am sure it is not that,' protested Lucy, getting very hot, red, and uncomfortable in what had been her cold pallor before. 'I do not care whose cousin Tony North is, or where he stays. I say again I should not like to borrow money from him or any man—at least, not unless he happened to be as old and as well known to me—even then I should be very much affronted—as Mr. Fielding.'

'An excellent rule,' said Celia drily; 'stick to it by all means. I was only going to say that, though Tony is the vicar's cousin and guest, he does not lay claim to be his chum. You might depend upon no tales being carried in that quarter. But take your own way; I don't wish to influence you. I ought not even to answer for Tony—yonder he comes round the tor. If you prefer to go through with the matter, to let these people do their utmost and you be summoned to answer for what you've done—as you like; I have nothing to do with it, I am happy to say.'

'No, no, don't say that,' cried Lucy, as if her last stay was about to be taken from her. 'It would drive me mad to go into a court. If you think there is no other way, and that it is not very wrong—if you think he can let me have the money and wait for the repayment till Jem is in better circumstances——'

'Bosh!' said Celia. 'What is a five-pound note that you should make such a fuss about it? Men who deserve to be called men bet it over and over again at every racecourse and card-table. I dare say Tony has betted and borrowed not only his five pounds but his fifty pounds a hundred times without a scrap of ceremony. Even his reverence the parson could not make much out of a loan of five pounds, or five pounds ten—which is it, Lucy?'

Then Celia hailed Tony North as he drew near. 'Are you willing to succour a damsel in distress?'

'With my life,' answered Tony, lifting his hat, salaaming, and making *moues* with his grinning, sallow face. 'It is not worth much, I am sorry to say; but such as it is she is welcome to it.'

'Not with your life, with your purse.'

'Ah! that is another matter; but again I say, such as it is she is welcome to it. Fortunately I was, marvellous to relate,

paid a long-standing debt of honour only yesterday. I have not yet had the time and opportunity to dispose of the golden harvest. Is it you, Miss Endicott, who desire a contribution to your pet charity? Will you mention its nature? Is it on behalf of impecunious men about town?—that would be heavenly of you, only in this case it would be taking from Peter to give to Paul. Is it for superannuated canary-birds, or what?'

'It is not a contribution, it is a loan,' said Celia undauntedly; while Lucy, after exchanging bows with the gentleman, walked, the picture of despair, beside her sister.

'Proud and happy to oblige you,' murmured Tony, with a shade of surprise in his manner in spite of his experience in banking for ladies. 'Only don't draw it too strong, pray; excuse my infernal slang, I mean, please to recollect that, though my will to be of use is boundless, my capacity, which but for that unexpected payment yesterday would have been *nil*, is, I am sorry to say, limited.'

'It is not I who am the borrower, it is Lucy here,' cried Celia, with hardly disguised glee and triumph in her tones, because she had succeeded in bringing Lucy to this pass, and led her to commit an impropriety on her own account which would far exceed any of her—Celia's—escapades in the eyes of the guardians and censors of social morals. 'Soft-hearted, silly, stuck-up little wretch!' was Celia's secret verdict on her sister, hardly modified by one or two grains of natural affection.

'Miss Lucy!' exclaimed Tony, no longer seeking to hide his astonishment. 'I suppose I thought you above sordid cares and wants,' he felt it necessary to explain his surprise, 'not matter-of-fact and mercenary like your sister and me.'

'It is not to spend,' said Lucy, with nervous trepidation; 'that is, it is to pay something which I stupidly bought without having the money to give for it at the time. I have been dreadfully disappointed in the tradespeople's not waiting longer, and in my not being able to apply for assistance in the quarter I counted on.'

'By no means an uncommon experience,' pronounced Tony seriously, but with a twinkle approaching to a well-bred leer in his eyes. 'These low curs of tradespeople are always disappointing us in the common civility of waiting; and there are constantly quarters as solvent as the Bank of England stopping payment just to spite us, or there are certain "moneys" bound to flow into our exhausted coffers which are inexplicably arrested in the flowing. These are natural phenomena—so universal that I may say they have ceased to be wonderful. The only out-of-the-way element in the misfortune is that it should have happened to a charming young lady! What should I not give for countless thousands to place at her disposal?' cried Tony, striking an attitude on the moor really as good as could have

been accomplished by a moderately talented stage-player, except that Tony's left boot went into a rabbit's hole, and he recovered his balance with difficulty.

Celia laughed openly. Lucy herself could not restrain a faint titter—at which Tony gave a brief scowl, though he did not pretend that nothing had befallen him. On the contrary, he calmly rubbed his shin as a further challenge to Celia's ridicule.

'What sum at my command will you do me the honour to accept?' he asked with studied civility. 'I am grieved to say that I cannot, myself, go beyond a pitiful couple of ten-pound notes; but, if you will allow me, I can run up to town and do what I can to raise the wind for you in other directions, as I have often raised it for myself and my friends.'

'Oh dear no! it is not necessary,' Lucy hastened to tell her accommodating champion. 'What you mention is four times as much as I am begging for. Oh dear! I am afraid it is begging, and I have no right to beg from you, unless because you are a friend of Celia's. You know,' hesitating in her candour, 'you have not been a great friend of mine.'

'I know. You have no idea how deeply I have deplored it,' asserted Tony unblushingly. 'I have so coveted the regard of both of you young ladies that I have been reduced to acting a part, to professing to myself and the rest of the world that I had your confidence as well as your sister's.'

'Don't imagine you have mine,' interrupted Celia lightly, 'any more of it than I choose to dole out to you when it suits me. You are two very delightful people, standing haggling and haranguing each other, and going about the bush. Make a bargain, and have done with it.'

'I scorn a bargain,' swore Tony. 'It is I who am the beggar, the debtor, if you will oblige me by accepting any advance within my power.'

'If you can only let me have five pounds till I can speak about it to Jem,' whispered Lucy, carried away by her need and his fine words, and further deceived by his evident sense of the trifling amount of money she was distressing herself about.

For he laughed, like Celia, as he said, 'With all my heart, Miss Lucy, with all the pleasure in life,' and handed her a five-pound note with a flourish.

He had just sufficient remains of a gentleman in him to keep him from pressing more of his money upon her, while he had not the good feeling to treat the transaction as a simple matter of business.

Neither had she the knowledge and wit to propose to give him an acknowledgment of the loan she had received, though she did turn to Celia in Lucy's confused, prim little way, and call on her sister to act as a witness.

'You see, Celia, what Mr. Tony North has been so kind as to lend me. You'll see me pay it back, won't you?'

'Indeed, Lucy, I'll promise nothing of the kind,' said Celia indifferently. 'He must take his chance, as he is too gallant to mind doing. You'll be asking me to draw out a paper and become security for you next. You had better send him the bangles, locket, &c., which you were talking about, till you can discharge your tremendous debt. I never borrowed money from him,' she remarked with an air of superior virtue, 'though I dare say I have cost him as much in bets of gloves which I have won from him—the more fool he to engage in losing bets—which he has had to walk to Ashford to pay. I never give anybody peace who is in my debt.'

Tony North was making a show of despair. 'Cost! Security! What do you take me for?' he exclaimed. 'A base curmudgeon, a vile money-lender, when I am only too favoured, too gratified——'

'Spare us and yourself,' cried Celia; 'the only "too too" about it is that you are too too high-flown. If you don't come down a peg or two in your flight I shall find you unbearable presently.—This must be all your doing, Lucy, he is not so superfine with me. He is a great deal more natural, and therefore twice as good company.'

Lucy went home half comforted, half uneasy and ashamed. The next day she went into Ashford, and to her immense relief freed herself from her fetters to Mr. Bliss and Mrs. Denny. But she had only taken a worse than fruitless step from Scylla to Charybdis, or, as the Scotch put it more graphically, from the Deil to the deep sea, with the order of the progress reversed, as it is in most instances. She had not only reduced herself to still more abject dependence on Celia, she had become the bond-slave of Tony North.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PONY-DRIFT—AN AUSTERE YOUNG VICAR.

In fact, Lucy had not got rid of her undesirable obligations; she had only shifted them, and they haunted her persistently. If she could but have forgotten them, she might have been tolerably at ease again, particularly after Celia had assured her that Jem was only crying 'wolf' with regard to his circumstances, that they were no worse than they had been nearly two years before. There seemed a perversity about Lucy's long memory in this matter; for though she did not like Tony North any better than she had ever liked him—rather, if possible, shrank more from him—she could not in fairness say that he had, as

yet, taken any mean advantage of the relation of debtor and creditor in which they now stood to each other. But she had ceased to feel that the relation was rendered quite light and tolerable because she had merely borrowed a sum of money that in his eyes and Celia's was a trifle. When she thought the matter over for herself, she could not agree with them in their arithmetical philosophy. What did it signify whether the amount of her debt were five or five hundred pounds, when she could no more pay the smaller than the larger figure? Certainly there was more possibility of Jem's intervention to discharge the five than the five hundred. But she had not begun to see any opening in the cloud of adversity which hung over Blackhall that could give her courage to confess and appeal to Jem, while she lived in the vague, yet earnest hope of such an opening occurring. She could not endure to think that she was to continue always in Tony North's debt, even for so paltry a sum as five pounds.

Lucy was sensitively alive to the indignity implied in the change of her tone to Tony, though she was aware that it was her guilty conscience which had brought it about. She scrupled at contradicting him; she lived in dread of offending him. She consented to go everywhere with him and Celia, until she was constantly to be seen in their company, and rarely to be found absent from them. Well, after all, that was not worse or nearly so bad as having it commonly said of the girl that she met the objectionable man, who was ten years her senior, alone, by appointment, and that she was in the habit of walking with him, unaccompanied by her sister, at unsuitable hours, in undesirable places. At the same time, Lucy's perpetual association with the two others lent colour to the earlier report, and was taken as abundant evidence that she had her full share in the intimacy, neither withdrawing from it nor testifying in any other way her disapproval of it. Lucy Endicott could not have said that it was Tony North who extorted the submission from her. It was her conscience and her cowardice together which did it.

On Tony North's part he was persuaded, for some time, that he was behaving remarkably well to Lucy Endicott. He was treating her with a degree of consideration and forbearance that surprised himself, with regard to which he did not know whether to feel a little proud or a little scandalised. He had not the same kind of respect for her which he had for Celia, but he liked Lucy better. She was never 'dooced' impertinent to him, as he told himself her sister was sometimes, brooding over what passed between them, and working himself into a rage before he made the admission. Lucy really did nothing to provoke him, since she had left off sitting puritanically upon him and shunning him. He was half of opinion that he could have found it in his heart to forgive the debt she had incurred to

him, and to refrain from making his own out of it, had it not been for three things. He was afraid that Celia Endicott would sneer and laugh at his simplicity and magnanimity—whatever she liked to call it. Oxcleeve was so confoundedly dull that he must contrive some amusement for himself. There was his cousin and host, the self-righteous parson, whom Tony hated with a robust and genuine hatred. Miles had elected himself Lucy Endicott's defender and avenger. Very well, his muscular Christianity should have something to guard against and avenge. He should see how Miss Lucy had turned tail, how she played into the enemy's hand, and was as clay moulded by the potter.

The occasion which presented itself to Tony, rather than was selected by him, for the display of his power over his victim, was the Pony-drift, held just below No Man's Leap, to which all the world in the Oxcleeve corner of the moor went in August.

Such a sight was not to be seen out of a land of wild horses. Upwards of five hundred mares and their foals were sought out and surrounded on the moor, till they could be driven by the moormen and the ponies' owners or their representatives into a walled enclosure, in which mares and foals stood in such a panting, pawing, tumultuous crowd as a herd of cattle present, on a much smaller scale, when they are deposited, sorely against their will, in railway trucks or on the deck of a steamer. The object of the gathering and stampede was that each mare, colt, and foal should be branded afresh, or for the first time, so as to be known by the moormen of the district; the branding consisting of a small slit made in the ear, in which a coloured bit of tape was inserted and fastened. The operation, done quickly and skilfully, was probably not so trying to the animal as the action of securing it, which of necessity preceded the branding. A couple of men seized the struggling creature by the fore-legs and threw it on the ground, holding it there till the deed was done.

The spectacle drew together scores and hundreds, not only of those intimately concerned in the performance, but of gazers with no particular interest in the work—not even in local horseflesh—though every small farmer and quarrymaster owned at least a dozen of these ponies, whose keep cost so little, summer and winter. People came a good many miles, still more than on the annual dragging of Delaval Pool—to stand at ease, singly or in groups, to sit on horseback, or in such carriages as Lady Jones's pony phaeton—with the strongest of springs and the surest footed of ponies, equal to long detours over moorland tracks, rather than roads—or to perch unsteadily on the neighbouring dry stone walls, and remain for hours watching each pony as it was laid hold of, overcome, and operated upon with the swiftness of great surgeons in hospital theatres, and let loose

to flee back to the wilds. Verily, as Tony North said, Oxcleeve was barren of public amusements out of the hunting season, when the Pony-drift was so largely attended.

One attraction was a cloudlessly fine day, with a buoyant atmosphere. Another was an opportunity for the circulation of much racy and spicy local gossip. Frank Briton claimed colts 'that were none of his'n—sewer.' 'Ned Veale's owd meare's bones were a-cuttin' o' the zkin, though he had passed his word to her owd master that her would be ztabled all the winter; but ne'er a ztable the mear had zeen, and for a diet of oats and turmits, to which Ned were zworn, zissels and burdock were the best the pewer beast had zmacked.' 'Could any man tell for zertain whatten price Luke Tredinnock had wormed out of that zofty Tom Le Grice, when Tom's zow were at Truscoe Fair?' 'What were the meaning of that 'ere black eye Luke had half hidden under his billycock hat?'

Still, the main charm to the mass was akin to what causes the popularity of hippodromes and circuses—an experience always stirring, though a trifle monotonous, and by no means novel to the residents in the neighbourhood. There was the chance of looking at the multitude of ponies, black and brown, white and grey, and studying their unstudied snorting and stamping, rearing and plunging—the last two feats having the excitement of danger to the ponies' fellows in the drift, and to those of their masters who were impressing the sign of bondage on their subjects, to be borne even in the comparative freedom of the moor. How highly that freedom was prized by the more than half-wild creatures might be seen by the hot haste with which the branded ponies, liberated after the branding, threw up their heels, shook the dust from their hoofs, and scoured away like the wind to the remotest fastnesses of bleak tor and grey boulder, prickly furze and tangled heather. If the sight was not nearly so good as a bull-fight, a bear-fight, even a dog-fight; not so high-bred and inspiriting as a meet and a run with the hounds; not so coming-home to a man as a boxing-match—at least it was more than a match for any show in the Agricultural Hall of a great city.

The humour of the situation belonged largely to the captives let loose; such pathos as it held was to be found in the pairs of mares and foals trotting up to the goal, or wedged together inside the barriers.

Lady Jones recognised the pathos if no one else did, as she sat with her lonely heart looking out of her grey eyes, which shone so strangely under her white hair, watching the poor mares in their own scare, whinnying still to their terrified foals, and licking them over with encouraging caresses.

George Fielding, keeping more apart than had been his wont from his kind, could not help regarding Lady Jones with intent interest, and divining what was passing in her mind. He did

not attempt to join her or to speak to her beyond a passing salutation, but he was near enough to see another expression, a comical look, flit across her face, and to hear her gravely ask the vicar if he had seen Benjie Gear in the throng. Benjie would not be absent from such an assemblage.

George wondered she could hazard such an allusion, till he remembered that the Dartmoor legend of the man transformed into a pony was as widely spread as legend could be, and figured in every comprehensive guide-book. The Rev. Miles had no difficulty in taking her up, and pointed to a colt with a particularly wicked eye, as his ideal of the bewitched or bewarlocked Benjie.

Lady Jones had invited Lucy Endicott to go with her to the Drift; but Lucy, who had begun with being much pleased by the attentions lavished on her by her brother's tenant, appeared to have adopted Celia's attitude to the widow. Lucy did not, indeed, take umbrage at the notice bestowed on her, but she put Lady Jones off with excuses and evasions; yet here was the girl with her sister and Tony North present at the Drift, after having walked the four miles of rough road, which was far too great a pull on her slender strength. Lucy was content to stand apart with the two others and make herself as conspicuous as Mrs. Lacy's sisters were making themselves. One of these young ladies was engaged to be married, and had her future husband in attendance on her; while the great aim of both her and her sisters seemed to be to show how unblushingly a bride elect may show off the captive of her bow and spear in the eyes of a gaping world.

Celia's and Tony's jests, to which Lucy listened eagerly, and at which she giggled loudly, could hardly have been so inane as the time-worn pleasantries on the ponies' earrings which were being bandied between the betrothed pair; but the very pungency and cynicism of the former ought not to have been their recommendation to any happy, kindly, healthy-natured young girl.

Lady Jones looked wistfully at Lucy. Certainly a change was coming over her; she appeared at once flushed, exhausted, and wilful.

Celia, in one of the richly tinted darker dresses from her judiciously selected and carefully preserved wardrobe, looked as well as usual; but Lucy had a deteriorated air—she was more than ever startlingly like her poor mother in the days when Mrs. Endicott was beginning to lose self-respect and hope. Even Lucy's dainty frock, in which she had looked so fair the first day she wore it, for which she had paid so dearly, had not stood a little strain on its qualities. It had not been cherished with Lucy's old neatness and tidiness, or else it had been wasted in her long walk. It was crumpled and out of order, and its vanishing delicacy of hue and fragility of material were entirely unsuited for such an occasion as the Pony-drift.

The vicar only glanced at Lucy in the company of his cousin, and kept at a distance from her, while his brow darkened. He was engaged in dodging Mrs. Reynolds, who loomed in the vicinity of her clergyman and her friend Lady Jones, unmistakably anxious to point out to both the objectionable conjunction of Tony North and the Endicott girls.

Lucy never looked at Miles North, and acted as if she remained unconscious of his presence, though his cousin, to whom nothing and nobody were sacred, stood at her elbow, and it was not likely that in the subjects for his blighting 'good things' he left out the vicar.

Jem Endicott lounged about in his ordinary solitary fashion, until he became suddenly conscious that his sisters were behaving in a manner which marked them out from the other young women present. He marched up to the trio, drew Lucy a little aside and spoke to her, with what effort he alone could have told. The play of faces was plainly visible, and the dialogue could be easily guessed. In point of fact he was saying sternly, 'Have done with this tomfoolery, Lucy. What do you and Celia mean by making a show of yourselves with that blackguard jackanapes? You have never moved a step from this spot since you came; but have stood grinning and giggling till people are beginning to ask what it is all about, and to point at you. I will not have it, I tell you.'

But Lucy stood at bay and defied him, to his amazement; probably to her own. 'I don't know what you mean. Let me alone, Jem,' she insisted with shrill peremptoriness. 'It is no business of yours; nobody will accuse you of taking care of your sisters, and making yourself answerable for them. Whom should I be with, if not with Celia? And Mr. Tony North is very—very obliging and amusing. I'm sure we're much obliged to him; as Celia says, I don't know what we should do without him. You are perfectly aware we have no acquaintances to meet and walk about with, as other girls have. Who was to blame for that in the first place, I wonder?'

Jem stared stupidly, and Lucy, agitated to the verge of tears, was going back to Celia to save herself from making an exposure of her feelings in the middle of her sham gaiety.

'Look here, Lucy,' said Jem, in a more conciliatory tone, 'there is Lady Jones over yonder, in her trap. She has been kind to you; can you not go to her?'

'I don't know anything about Lady Jones,' retorted Lucy pettishly, 'neither does anybody else; and I for one don't want to, because Celia won't have anything to do with her. You yourself have not so much as called on her once, though you would have no hesitation in throwing me upon her good offices. It is horrid for me always to have to find excuses for you and Celia. No, Jem, I can take care of myself. We are not doing any harm, whatever the friendly charitable company may

think; and as for entertainment, we are doing pretty well, thank you.'

Lucy was gone, and was, the next moment, singled out for Tony North's most marked attentions; he was evidently rallying and teasing her on her brother's interference.

Poor Jem, baffled in his single attempt at discipline, slunk away with a hang-dog air—the more forlorn, no doubt, for the reason that the Pony-drift was no occasion for a school holiday, and there was no little Kitty Carew on the ground to hold her own side of the question, and not permit him to do any more than haunt her footsteps doggedly.

Lady Jones could bear it no longer. She caught the vicar's eye, and made a beckoning sign to him. He came to her immediately. 'Will you do me a favour, Mr. North?' she entreated earnestly. 'Will you go to Miss Lucy Endicott, and tell her I beg her to come over and speak to me? Or, if you do not care to interrupt her conversation with your cousin'—she made an anxious amendment—'will you give me your arm and take me to her?'

The vicar was silent for a second, and then he said stiffly, like the gentleman he was, 'There is no occasion for your making an effort from which I can save you. I will deliver your message to Miss Lucy Endicott.'

He made his way to the two Endicotts and his cousin, the sender of the message following its bearer greedily with her eyes. The clergyman took off his felt hat with that exaggeration of politeness which men generally assume when they are forced into an encounter and compelled to act against the grain. He did not propose to shake hands with either of the sisters, nor did he take the slightest notice of his cousin, who stood grimacing at him, after the fashion of an unrepentant prodigal, a degraded and defiled satyr.

After a brief good-morning to the Miss Endicotts, Miles addressed himself directly to Lucy, speaking shortly and a little haughtily, without being sensible of it. 'I am here, Miss Lucy, with an invitation from Lady Jones for you to join her.'

Lucy turned white and red, and trembled visibly, while she glanced, with a desperate appeal, at her companions.

Celia continued to smile unconcernedly.

Tony North said, very softly and innocently, but with a certain emphasis, 'Tell the vicar and her ladyship you are very well where you are. We are selfish; we don't want any meddling with our nice little party—do we?'

'Be so good as not to dictate to Miss Lucy Endicott,' said Miles, in a still higher and mightier tone, and with rising heat. 'She does not want your help.'

'Oh! don't she?' remonstrated Tony, almost *sotto voce*, with sweet incredulity.

The effect of his remonstrance was electrical. Lucy did not

delay a minute longer. She was like a child hurrying to obey the prompting which she durst not resist. She spoke sharply and flippantly, using, as nearly as possible, Tony's very words, not being quick to find others, and not feeling that any change of words would lessen her pain and shame, which were ready to crush her in the dust the moment Miles North left her to her fate. 'I am very well as I am. I don't wish for any change; I—I don't care to be interfered with.' She paused, and then added, as if from herself with the irrestrainable querulousness of weakness tortured to the last gasp, 'I refused to come with Lady Jones to the Drift—am I not to be left to do as I please? Why can she not let me alone?'

'Bravo, Miss Lucy!' exclaimed Tony, with open, jeering triumph, when Miles turned his back. 'You have given them their *congé* with a vengeance. I predict you will not be troubled by my worthy cousin and the rich widow any longer.'

Lucy moaned in her heart. 'Oh! why did I say that? There was no need to be rude and insult him and Lady Jones when they only want to be kind and good to me. I have affronted and got rid of my best friends—Jem's tenant among them. But I cannot help it; there is no use in trying to help anything any longer.'

Accordingly, Lucy kept laughing hysterically for ten minutes after Miles North had felt it due to himself to say, 'I have to apologise for appearing officious,' had lifted his hat, stepped back, and was gone, in his pale imperturbability, to the person he had come from. He did not need to tell Lady Jones the result of his mission—she knew without being told.

Both were silent. At last, as he still stood by her side, with his hand grasping abstractedly the front bar of her carriage, a greater hubbub than before arose among the imprisoned ponies. An obstreperous small pony succeeded in leaping the barrier. It had a wide field for its career. It did not run between any man's legs, or disturb anybody's equanimity where a sense of personal danger was concerned; but it was pursued by half the men in attendance, while the attention of the spectators generally was laid hold of and engrossed by the animated pursuit. Even the engaged couple stopped their confidential conversation to watch the chase. Celia and Tony North looked round and gazed with the gazing mob. Only Lucy never turned her head.

The vicar, though a man and a Devonshire man, was soon satisfied with his inspection of the episode. He seized the opportunity to unburden himself to Lady Jones, and to clear himself from what measure of blame she might impute to him. He drew nearer to her, and she bent down to hear what he had to say.

'I suppose you think I ought not to keep that fellow hanging about here,' he said abruptly and harshly, pointing his meaning

by an unwilling glance in Tony's direction; 'but if I were to turn him adrift to-morrow, and let him loose elsewhere, where he could do a great deal more harm to himself and others, it would not matter. If it were not my scamp of a cousin it would be somebody else.'

At first she made him no reply; then she said a little coldly, 'Don't interfere with your domestic arrangements on my account, pray,' as if it was round her that the gad-fly was buzzing.

'These Endicott girls are infatuated and incorrigible,' he burst out passionately, unable to restrain himself. 'They have been warned repeatedly to no purpose. It would tempt one to believe there was a doom hanging over the family.'

If he had looked at her while he was speaking, he would have seen a quiver pass over her flesh, but he was too full of his subject.

She answered at last in a low disturbed tone, 'I cannot tell you how and why, but I am convinced Lucy is being sacrificed. She is not acting of her own free will. I feel as if I could cry out, "Is there no one to interfere and save the poor child?" She is so sweet sometimes, and she might be so good if she got fair play. I ask myself if it is part of my punishment—you know we have all offended and incurred punishment in our day, in one way or another,' she explained a little confusedly and wildly—'to sit by and see her likewise perish, with no power to prevent it.'

In any other cause he would have been struck by the strangeness of the speech, and would have stopped to analyse it; as it was, he went on gloomily: 'What can you make of a woman who declines to be rescued? She refuses to be saved, sweet as she is, good as she might be. Now, suppose there was a rescuer ready to risk everything he prized for her sake, his credit and usefulness, his very duty to his Maker. He would be a bold man,' he added hastily, with a half-shudder, and yet an indefinable longing in his voice, 'who would think twice of Lucy Endicott. Don't they say the girl is the picture of her mother?'

He was arrested and taken aback by the sudden, suppressed anguish with which, letting the reins fall on the ponies' necks, she clasped her hands together, and said in a choked voice, 'Oh, poor mother! whose very likeness is fatal to the child you bore and loved.'

Louder shouts than those which had gone before them rising over the moor showed that the renegade was caught, and about to be dragged back to receive its deserts, and there was a cessation of the interest which had centred in it.

The vicar's conversation with Lady Jones was brought to an abrupt conclusion, leaving him with an uneasy impression, highly disagreeable to a man of his temperament, that he had been betrayed, of all persons by Lady Jones, in whose discretion

he had put faith, into saying a great deal more than he ought, and making something of a fool of himself. What had she to do, sending him to reclaim Lucy Endicott, and drawing him into a discussion about her afterwards? The personal soreness blunted his perceptions for a time to another conclusion to which, thinking over the scene, he came ultimately—a conclusion similar to one at which George Fielding had arrived some time before, in reference to the identical person—'That woman must have had great trials and sorows of her own, to be moved as she was by what she conceived the wrong done to another—to a stranger.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SURLY JEM COME TO GRIEF.

THE long-delayed thunderstorm bursts in the end over town and country; the bolt, suspended for a space, falls at last; the cry of 'wolf' is no longer a purely mischievous, or a nervously apprehensive feint, but the desperate sign of an appalling reality. As happens frequently in the experience of most of us, the elaborate preparation for the encounter was of no service, save to lull to sleep under a false impression of continued security fears for which there was only too solid a foundation.

Sally Beaver had been summoned by Beaver to aid in his field-work. Beaver had Jem's authority for spiriting his wife away, at any moment, on his and his master's business—a privilege which the girls had resented and resisted to the best of their ability, in vain. A cow on the moor—the only cow kept for the use of the family—had hung out a signal of distress, and wanted a woman to see to her; for, as everybody knew, and Beaver remarked in agreement with the general opinion, 'women volk, but pewer company for men volk as a rule, were main handy when cow-ill were going round; nor were they to be despised when a man was laid on the flat of his back with summat.'

In the absence of Sally on her proper mission, if a knock came to the front door of Blackhall—luckily such an event was rare—somebody had to open the door. As that somebody was never by any chance Celia, not even though she might be sitting within earshot, idle or only singing at the top of a voice which, though it had received some training, was rather powerful than agreeable, Lucy was wont to go gingerly, and, opening the door a couple of inches, ask who was there. She did this even when Jem was within doors. He was ample protection from burglars—if they had thought Blackhall worth a visit in broad daylight; and as for anything further, he would have contented himself

with giving his sisters a contemptuous glance, which would have said as plainly as glance could say, 'You are not even good for opening a door; yet you take it upon you to despise women who can do that and a great deal more,' and then tramped down the stair, through the hall, and opened the door himself without more ado. Celia would have let him, but Lucy would not suffer it if she chanced to be in the way, she was too quick for him in this. She scrupled to open the door herself, but she scrupled still more that Jem should open it. If Jem could have seen it, there was something not sensibly, but foolishly pretty, in the way in which Lucy here put herself shrinkingly, shamefacedly, but still staunchly, in the breach before him.

Lucy opened the door on this September morning when there was more than dew, there was already silver hoar-frost hanging on the fast-fading ruby bells of the fuchsia hedges, and the berries which the birds were still sparing on the holly-stack. Through the two inches of the open door she found herself face to face with a pair of the most civil working men in their Sunday clothes whom she had ever had the good fortune to come across.

'By your leave, miss, we must see Squire Endicott,' said one of the pair deprecatingly.

'We begs your pardon, miss, for intruding,' said the other; adding, with much consideration, 'but if you will be zo good as to show us into the kitchen, we will give as little trouble as we can.'

Jem was out, but Lucy was so pleased with the good manners of the strangers that she had less reluctance than she might otherwise have felt in tripping before them into the kitchen, and trying in her blundering way to make them comfortable. 'I do not know when my brother will be back. I am afraid Sally has let the fire get low; but perhaps, as you must have had a walk, you have grown warm and will not feel the chill there is in the mornings now so near the moor. Both of the servants have gone out,' went on poor Lucy, taking Beaver on as a purely house servant, which she was wont to do in a vague, not intentionally deceitful, fashion, when she was pressed on the question of the numerical strength of the domestics. 'But one of them will be sure to be back presently, and will let you have a jug of ale, and bread and cheese.'

'No hurry, miss,' said the one man cheerfully.

'Never mind us,' chimed in the other modestly and affably. 'Us will attend to ourselves and not be in your way—not no more than we can help, miss.'

Lucy went up to Celia with the story that she had never had to do with two more civil men—she hoped they had been sent by somebody to buy some of Jem's live stock. She had heard him say to Beaver the other day that he thought cattle dealers and drovers had forsaken the place.

'What are you saying, Lucy? What are the men like?' asked Celia, sitting up in her chair, letting one of Tony North's books slip to the floor, and speaking with more interest than might have been looked for from her. 'Very civil are they? Have they begun to wag their tails, lick their lips, and roll their eyes?'

'Celia, are you out of your senses? Wag their tails, indeed! Men have no tails to wag,' protested Lucy indignantly.

'Not even coat-tails? I beg your pardon, I was thinking of tigers when they are preparing to make mincemeat of their keepers. "The Philistines be upon you, Samson." Depend upon it, Lucy, you have admitted the bailiffs.'

'Oh! no, no,' cried Lucy. 'They are two quite nice men;' but she collapsed into a chair opposite Celia at the terrible word.

'No doubt,' said Celia, picking up her book. 'I believe that is their way till they are crossed. They are most commendable in seeking to gild an odious trade. They used to be brutal all through, but it was a waste of power, and they know better now, like everybody else.'

'But it cannot be; say you are only teasing me,' implored Lucy. 'You would not speak in that cool way if—if it were come—Jem's ruin, you know, which we have all been fearing so long.'

Celia shrugged her shoulders. 'What would you have me to do if "Jem's ruin, you know," were come?'

'Do you think I might ask the men?' suggested Lucy in a trembling voice, growing pale with the daring of the proposal. 'Do you think they would tell me?'

'If you like. Yes; I dare say they would tell you, if they had no motive for concealing the truth. Perhaps it would be as well to ascertain the real state of the case, since it is just possible that your friends may be burglars, doing the thing quietly and politely, not to intimidate you unnecessarily. If so, you may tell them that they will get very little here—your bangles, silver thimble, and so forth—that is worth the trouble of carrying away.'

The idea of burglars in the forenoon, knocking at the front door and asking for Jem, did not recommend itself to Lucy's limited imagination, so that it had no deterrent influence on her. She departed, and was able to return and shut the sitting-room door before she broke into a passion of tears.

'Now, Lucy, if you are to howl I must retire and shut myself up in our room.' Celia calmly stated the alternative. 'It would be more to the purpose if you told me what you said and what the men said in reply.'

'You are r-right,' acknowledged Lucy, through the sobs she was struggling to suppress, speaking in a voice of despair. 'I just said, "Oh, if you please, are you the bailiffs?" and one of them

said, "That is about it; I'm sorry for you;" and the other said, 'Well, yes, miss, we be;" and oh, Celia! they've taken possession of the two arm-chairs, and they are smoking pipes, for as civil as they are——'

'Of course; every man is entitled to his little privileges and perquisites.'

'But to think I d-did it. I—his own sister—brought this on poor Jem!' and Lucy gave way anew to a tempest of weeping.

'You! Do you really think your miserable little bit of debt, which Tony North paid weeks ago, would have brought down the bailiffs on Jem? Did ever any one hear such preposterous conceit and vanity?'

Celia's ridicule and contempt had the effect of a cold bath in recovering and composing Lucy after her paroxysm of distress. 'No, it is not that,' she said more quietly, 'though I would give the world I had not bought that horrid frock and those other things; but, Celia, it was I—I,' breaking down again, 'who opened the door. I shall never forgive myself, though, of course, I did not guess who was behind it. I might have called to you, and you might have helped me; we might have closed and barred or locked it and kept the—the bailiffs out till Jem knew, and had time to think what he should do.'

'You are an idiot, Lucy,' said Celia with conviction. 'What good would it do to keep out these civil men, the bailiffs, when they have the law on their side? If they ever had the door shut in their faces at Blackhall, which from all I have heard is extremely probable, it was not Jem who performed the feat. He has not enough spirit. Besides, men and manners have changed. I believe bailiffs, like agents, were once counted good game. In the west of Ireland, for instance, they were shot down freely; but even in Connaught that would no longer be tolerated without causing a row.'

'Then what is to be done?' said Lucy, not showing particular interest in the change of manners in Connaught, but wiping her eyes and forcing down her sighs on account of Jem and the family.

'Why, nothing; that grand resource of impecunious people who live in houses and can't pay the rent, or support families on incomes which do not exist. It is very hard to fight against a policy of doing nothing. I put myself to the trouble of telling you some time ago that it was not a great additional misfortune for bailiffs to be in possession. Speak them fair and they will not dispossess you. Indeed, they cannot till all the creditors agree as to what is each man's share; which they are not likely to do, though there is honour amongst thieves. Tony North has told me of people who lived and enjoyed every luxury for years with the bailiffs behind the scenes. I dare say Tony was drawing a long bow, but there is something in such statements.

If Jem had any tact and enterprise, he might make his own of the accident.'

Lucy was, in a general way, as easily uplifted as she was swiftly cast down in her confidence with regard to what was about to happen to the family. But she had a strain of honesty in her which prevented her from taking refuge in this sanguine philosophical view of affairs. She was driven to suggest, reluctantly and haltingly, Mr. Tony North. He had helped her in her difficulty, might he not be able to lend temporary relief to Jem?

'What! convert Tony into a family benefactor?' cried Celia, with one of her ringing, piercing laughs. 'How can you be so mean, after the manner in which you have all treated him? Poor dear Tony, to be so taken advantage of! One never expected to have to regard him as a victim to his generosity and magnanimity. It would better become you, Miss Lucy, to think how your little debt is ever to be paid now. You don't mean to say that you have modestly made up your mind to its never being paid? That is all very well for you, but I am not certain that Tony, in spite of his gallantry, will put up with it. You had better take care and not try him too far, lest he be tempted to betray your secret, and send Jem his claim with the claims of the other creditors.'

'Oh! he would surely never be so cruel; it would be too hard on poor Jem as well as on me,' lamented Lucy, reduced once more to the deepest despondency.

'I don't see that it could matter much to Jem, as things are,' said Celia unfeelingly.

'Not to know that I had taken on things, and kept it from him; and borrowed the money to pay for them from a man he does not like?' said Lucy, repeating each of the enormities under her breath, and with scared, guilty eyes.

'Of course it was shocking of you,' said Celia, pronouncing the condemnation with great relish in the middle of the lightness with which it was uttered.

'Why, Celia, it was you yourself who urged me to buy the frock and things, and afterwards suggested that Tony North might lend me the money to pay for them,' remonstrated the unhappy Lucy. 'Don't you remember you said it was such a trifle that nobody would think anything of it; everybody would laugh at me for making an outcry about it?'

'Did I?' asked Celia unblushingly. 'I suppose you had come round me, as people say, and played on my good nature to take pity on you. But when I think of it, I see I was mistaken on more than one point. For instance, it makes it worse instead of better that you should have done it for such a beggarly sum, like the man in the Bible who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Dear! dear! to incur indelible disgrace—if it were ever known—and offend Jem past forgiveness for four pounds

ten! not much more than a girl who has a decent allowance of pocket-money might give for a Persian kitten or a piping bullfinch.

Neither did Jem put the arrival of the bailiffs in the advantageous light of a blessing in disguise. His manliness certainly prompted him to affect stoicism, and even to express relief at the close of the long hard fight and sickening suspense, in which despair had always loomed larger than hope; but that was different from Celia's tone of frank congratulation.

After an interview with the men below, he came up to the sitting-room, where the girls still were, and walked without a word to the farthest window. He stood looking out at nothing in particular, apparently, with his back to Celia and Lucy, for what were, to Lucy, several agonising minutes. Then he turned round and said harshly:

'I suppose you girls know who are downstairs, and that there is the end of it, just as I told you?'

'Oh! Jem, I am so sorry for you,' said Lucy, through her fast-falling tears.

'There is no good to be got by turning on waterworks,' said poor Jem impatiently, with little either of graciousness or grace.

'Will you be so good as to tell us what good there is to get, and where we are to get it?' said Celia with a cutting voice, as if his way of meeting the crisis provoked her quite as much as Lucy's tears annoyed him—as if she looked on him in the light of the person to blame for their poverty. Unquestionably she did so, by whatever queer distorted logic she contrived to do it.

'None that I know of,' said Jem sullenly. 'I don't know anything you two can do; you must find out that for yourselves.' He walked over to his table and the desk which held the accounts over which he had so long pored and pondered in vain. He locked and double-locked the desk and pushed back the table as if he meant to have nothing more to do with them. He turned round with a weary, hopeless expression on the face which had not looked young for many a day, and yet was not so very much older than those of the girls opposite him. 'So far as I am concerned,' he said drearily, 'I could be glad it was all over. As for you two, you must think what is to become of you. I shall try to get work of some kind, and you may share my wages; but it is not at all likely that they will content fine madams, even if they will keep you from starving. Perhaps you had better go back at once to the relations you came from and see what they can do for you, since I shall ask no help from them.'

Celia sat swelling in bitter resentment, injured, insulted, because Jem could not manage like other men, like other bankrupts, to maintain the women of the family—not even after the wretched fashion in which he had kept them for the last year and a half. Lucy slipped away and actually braved Celia's wrath.

The Endicotts' misfortunes were past concealment, past retrieval; Jem had said it, and Lucy had no notion that he would change his mind; she had no conception of the artful devices by which persons of spirit, as Celia would have put it, mask the presence of bailiffs in the house and go on the owners' way not minding, and expecting their friends and acquaintances to be equally inobservant and oblivious. Lucy herself was in mortal terror of the 'wolves in sheep's clothing' whom she had introduced on the premises—though it was a crumb of comfort that Jem had never asked who let the men in, or signified that, if he had been apprised of their coming, he would have fought them off to the last drop of his blood.

It showed how profoundly Lucy was moved, and how her emotion caused her to forget herself and to overcome her natural timidity, that, having secured her hat and jacket, she slipped on tiptoe downstairs, through the hall and out at the front door, either as if she feared that the bailiffs would suspect her of carrying off what tables and chairs the Endicotts had left, or as if the men might consider the very clothes she wore to be Jem's property, which she was not at liberty to convey out of the house beyond the officers' scrutiny. It was true that her frock and hat belonged to Jem, if they did not belong to Tony North, in lieu of that other frock and hat which she had learned to hate.

Lucy was bound for the Court; she did not care in her roused feelings what Celia might say. Lucy did not even mind, what she recollected perfectly well, that she had behaved very badly to Lady Jones at the Pony Drift; she did not know how her ladyship might receive her. But the knowledge and the uncertainty which accompanied it, that would have rendered Lucy passive and helpless in ordinary circumstances, went for nothing on the day when Jem was ruined out and out, and there was nobody to whom his sister could go to seek advice and aid for him and herself and Celia save his tenant, who had shown herself willing to befriend the family, whom Lucy had rewarded with neglect and rudeness.

Lucy had not to wait long to learn how she was to be met by the mistress of the Court. Lady Jones must have seen the girl hurrying across the green, almost falling over the geese that came in her way, in her preoccupation and haste, for by the time she had opened the wicket-gate the mistress of the house was half way down the flagged path between her mock balsams, golden-feathers, ribbon grass, and autumn phloxes, in spite of that wavering, feeble gait of hers which had pathos in it when one looked in her face. She had been able to nerve and steady it when she sought to track the Spanish Madam to her favourite haunt; now Lady Jones's walk was that of painfully feeling for, clutching at and scraping the ground in her eagerness to traverse it. But her white face, luminous eyes, and half open lips were

all full of welcome. 'What is it?'—she spoke first. 'Something is amiss and you are come to me—that is right; let me get back to the seat in the porch, and then tell me all about it.'

Tottering as she was, Lady Jones put her arm round Lucy as if to support her, instead of taking the support she needed herself, and drew her within the porch.

Lucy was only too glad to sit down on one of what Celia had called 'beggars' seats,' and not to mind the passers-by, the ubiquitous geese, Zecchy and Lovey coming to the draw-well, and, what was more formidable, the large aggressive figure of Mrs. Reynolds, which might at any moment tower like a colossus in her gateway and threaten to descend on her neighbour across the green.

Naturally Lucy was very careful of appearances; but she felt inclined to throw them to the winds when by this time either Beaver or Sally must have re-entered the kitchen at Blackhall, been made sensible of who had now a better right to be there than Squire Endicott and his servants had, and must be primed with the melancholy news which, if it were not already all over Oxcleeve, would be discussed in every cottage before nightfall.

'I am afraid I startled you, my dear,' said Lady Jones gently, as if she were calling herself to order; 'but I saw by your face you had something to say. Now, take your own time to say it. But first, did you eat your breakfast this morning? Is there anything you could take to refresh you? There is wine in the sideboard. It will not be long till lunch, and I dare say Charlotte—my cook, you know—could get you a basin of soup; or would you like a glass of milk? Is there anything which I could get for you that you think would do you good? Only tell me, Lucy,' urged Lady Jones, in the tones which were so motherly in a childless woman, and so strange and sweet to a motherless girl.

'No, no, you are too kind, I don't deserve it,' stammered Lucy.

'Never mind what you deserve; it does not signify to me,' persisted Lady Jones, in an inconsequent, reckless fashion.

'But I don't want anything; I ate my breakfast the same as usual—we did not know then——' And with that the pent-up torrent of words and tears burst forth as incoherently as might have been expected. In the meantime the two contrasted figures, forgetting everything in their earnest conversation—the white-haired, white-faced widow in her heavy black weeds, and the yellow-haired, pink-cheeked girl in her flimsy girlish dress—sat framed in the grey porch of the old Court, where many an Endicott had sat discussing their troubles long before the days of Gentleman Greenaway, where the Spanish Madam herself might have found shelter from the cold. Outside the garden gate the geese stretched their long necks, poked their

heads through the bars, and peered curiously at the conference, preserving an unwonted silence, as if loth to disturb the *tête-à-tête*.

'Oh, Lady Jones, can you tell me what to do?' began Lucy. 'I must work for myself, whatever people may think of me. I can't live off Jem's wages when he is reduced to taking wages, and when there is a chance of our starving, for then I know he will not eat a bite that we may have enough. Nothing can save him, and I shall have helped to kill my brother!'

'I do not understand you,' said Lady Jones, in a maze. 'There can be no question of starving, or of saving your brother. As to working for yourself, nobody worth minding will think any harm of you for doing so. Between you and me, I wonder you and your sister did not try it a year and a half ago. You and I see some things in a different light. However, you need not do it unless you like, though of course it depends on what you call working,' and a peculiarly happy smile flitted for an instant across Lady Jones's face.

'I know I am silly,' said Lucy meekly, 'but Celia agrees with me here. The world looks down on girls who go out as governesses,' persisted Lucy, who could rarely get quit of a rooted idea and was seldom capable of entertaining more than one at a time. 'I never thought I should have to spend my days in shabby school-rooms, have to walk last into other rooms, dine when families lunched, and be invited into drawing-rooms to play when people danced.' Lucy ran mournfully over the list of small grievances and humiliations, while Lady Jones could hardly refrain from another smile, but managed to suppress it in order not to hurt her companion's feelings.

'People have to bear worse than that in this world,' she ventured to suggest mildly.

'Oh, yes,' owned Lucy; but she showed herself a little aggrieved at her catalogue of woes being depreciated. 'People are a great deal poorer than that, then they go and do wrong frequently, and there is no end to the misery and suffering all about—one sees that even in Oxcleeve, nobody needs to be told of it. Still, I do not know how my sister and I are to bear what we may have to put up with,' went on Lucy; 'for Celia is very proud and has a great deal of spirit, as you may have found out.'

'I should have thought that it would have been all the other way, and that her pride and spirit would have helped her to work for herself,' said Lady Jones slowly.

'Oh, no, Celia's pride is not that kind of pride,' explained Lucy glibly. 'Besides, as I said, we never dreamt of such a thing. We had no reason to expect it, and it is really very hard, when we are squire's daughters, like Millie and Nettie Barnes. All Miss Penfold's pupils were not squires' daughters, they were *mostly* the daughters of doctors and lawyers. We

did suspect that one of the girls was the daughter of a hotel-keeper, which was very wrong. I don't mean that she could help it, but she ought not to have been sent to Miss Penfold's among the rest of us; and I do not believe that she was even going to be a teacher,' ended Lucy, as if this fact implied an additional indignity.

'Well, that may say something for the gentility of teaching,' hinted Lady Jones. 'It was perhaps some of the better-class girls who were training for teachers.'

'No, indeed,' said Lucy with conviction, 'the pupil-teachers were a class by themselves—I think one of them was a poor lady, but another was the Miss Penfolds' niece, and a third was the daughter of the writing-master. There was a fourth for a short time, and she was the daughter of a surgeon, she said, but we were almost sure he was a veterinary surgeon. She was very close and very pushing, and it was evident she meant to rise in the world.'

'Very commendable,' argued Lady Jones, 'if she understood rising in the world in the proper sense.'

There was a moment's pause, and then Lucy admitted ingenuously, 'I am sure I don't know how I am ever to do it—teach, I mean—for though I got prizes for elocution and English and French dictation, in addition to those for good conduct, and I have kept up my painting as well as I was able, I was never one of the head girls at Miss Penfold's. I was not like Celia—she always says I am stupid. People may find me out and not have me for a teacher.'

'There are worse things than being stupid,' said Lady Jones quickly. 'Not that I think you stupid—you were very clever about the schoolgirls' sewing the other day.'

'That was only sewing. There is no cleverness in sewing,' said Lucy.

'I don't know that. You may be sure of this, there is some use for you in the world, else you would not be here—only don't be too particular. Even squires' daughters have to make themselves useful sometimes in ways they did not always foresee. They may be thankful when they can make themselves useful in any way, ay, in standing at a washing-tub or in being a scullery-maid. But what has put all this into your head to-day? Forgive me for asking,' exclaimed Lady Jones, getting a little excited in her turn. 'Has your brother been speaking to you of his affairs? It is no secret that he is in embarrassed circumstances.'

'Oh, Lady Jones,' cried Lucy, recalled to the extremity of the situation, 'the bailiffs are at Blackhall.'

'The bailiffs!' said Lady Jones, starting up as if she were young and strong enough to rout a host of bailiffs, and then sitting down again exhausted. 'Oh! poor fellow. That must be seen to at once. Why did you not tell me in the beginning?

Does George Fielding know? Has Jem sent for him? What is he doing?'

Lucy stared, startled by the rush of questions.

'I am anxious to be of service to you,' said Lady Jones hastily. 'I am a great deal older than all of you, and I am your brother's tenant—that is one tie between us, is it not?'

Lucy did not stop to ask herself why Lady Jones should care so much, though she was a friendly, middle-aged woman, Jem's tenant. Lucy was not even offended in her little punctiliousness by the unceremonious directness of the style in which she was assailed for further information. 'Jem says it is all over. This is the end,' said Lucy, with a fresh gush of tears.

'No, it is not all over. This is not the end,' said Lady Jones firmly, rising to her feet again and preparing to enter the house. 'It will all come right in time, if you Endicotts will let it. I thought you would have to wait till a life lapsed, but this must be seen to at once—there is no time to lose. I am going to order out my ponies and drive over to Ashford to speak to Mr. Fielding. Will you come with me? I shall be glad of your company—I am always glad of it. I hope you understand that.'

Lucy thanked the woman who had been so kind to her and so patient with her, wondering a little vaguely, yet drawn to her in a manner the girl could not resist. But she would not go to Ashford if she could help it; with or without Lady Jones she had shrank from entering the town, for reasons of her own, for a number of weeks. She felt as if Mr. Bliss and Mrs. Denny must know all about her mode of paying their bills, and might expose her at any moment. She was by no means sure that Jem would not be angry with her for repairing to Lady Jones on such a day, on such an errand. She dreaded lest Celia should discover where she had been and what she had done.

Lady Jones went alone to Ashford, and Lucy hurried back to Blackhall—not knowing very well what to think. She was sure that she had a friend and that friend meant to help and save the Endicotts; but she did not see how it could be, she was not able to believe that Lady Jones's help could be of much avail when Celia had never cared for her or had any faith in her, and when Jem had said of the family fortunes, 'It is all over. This is the end.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

'JEM MUST BE SAVED.'

It was market-day in Ashford, but George Fielding happened to be for the moment alone in his private room, where Mrs. Reynolds had interviewed him one morning in spring. It was now autumn, and in the interval a good deal had come to pass in his private consciousness where the tenant of the Court was concerned. And at this instant the said tenant was shown into George's office.

He had told himself for some time that he must be prepared for anything, and the sequel proved that he had made the reflection to some purpose, for he put on a calm face impervious to scrutiny. He received his visitor with quiet politeness—installing her in his chair, in which she sank back in bodily weariness. He went out quickly and told the clerk whom the information chiefly concerned that Lady Jones had private business with him and that they were not to be interrupted on any pretext whatever, not though Sam Russel brought his lease to be looked over, or the Horlocks were come to pay the interest on their bond, or Kit Hedgeland were to turn up with the missing paper in his lawsuit. Then George Fielding returned to Lady Jones with measured steps, not because he was assuming deliberation, but because he was forced to delay the encounter for a minute or two longer. In spite of his self-control and the precautions which were the result of being forewarned, he could not shake off a sense of the strangeness of reflecting who it was that was sitting in his room after time and change had done their work with unusual effect—what it would have been to him fifteen years ago to know her there, and what his father would have thought of her presence! His father had not known how to regard Joanna Endicott. He had not been without favour for her; he had been just to her in her adversity. At the same time he had been repelled by her—as what father would not have been repelled by the girl who had rejected his son?—for whom at the same time she would have been anything save a desirable match in the eyes of the world.

The next moment George was standing before Lady Jones seeking to reassure her, while she was rapidly recovering herself. 'Can I do anything for you?' he asked. 'I have given directions that nobody shall be shown in here, if you have business with me, as I take it for granted you have.'

'Thanks,' she said, in her clear, full voice, 'that was good of you. It is not my business entirely, it is other people's as well—yours among the rest,' with a faint, fleeting smile. Then

she went straight to the point. 'You are agent for my landlord. Have you heard that the bailiffs are at Blackhall this morning?'

He had not heard; but, in the double consciousness under which he was labouring, he could not for the life of him think so much of what the advanced stage at which Jem Endicott's troubles had arrived would signify to him, as of what it must be to her sitting there to know that the bailiffs were at Blackhall this September morning.

He roused himself and told her that he had not heard, but he was not surprised at the news. He was afraid it was the beginning of the end.

'No,' she said, contradicting him flatly, 'that shall not be if I can prevent it. Sit down and consult with me about what is to be done.'

He sat down mechanically at her bidding, and waited for her to say more.

'Jem must be saved, come what may, George.'

His heart gave a great throb and beat more violently than it had done for a dozen years. He thought she was on the eve of revealing her personality, if she had not revealed it in that speech; but her next words undeceived him. She had evidently no intention of taking him into her confidence, unless the step were inevitable. The use of his Christian name was a mere slip of the tongue which might easily occur, and be unperceived by her, when she was pre-occupied and agitated. Indeed, it had happened before in similar circumstances, when they had been conversing together in reference to a startling incident which he now knew had concerned her nearly; and in his ignorance he had treated the blunder as possibly the result of unconventional habits and familiar tricks of speech acquired during her earlier life in the colonies.

'You are aware that I take an interest in the Endicott family, Mr. Fielding,' she was saying, much more formally, as if she were making a preconcerted explanation. But perhaps you do not also know that I am rich and cannot tell what to do with my money. I am willing to advance what is necessary, on proper security, of course, to relieve my landlord in any way you think best, but it must be done quickly. Lucy ran across to me this morning. They are in great distress, which they must be spared as soon as it can be managed.'

It was his turn to smile a little. The speech was so like a woman's, he told himself, and yet she had it in her to act with a man's energy and determination.

'I formed my own conclusions as to your command of money when you took the Court in the condition in which it stood,' he said; 'but I am sorry to tell you, as a matter of duty, that Jem Endicott's circumstances are all but desperate. The man who has put in the bailiffs—I think I can guess who it is, though I am not absolutely certain—is only one of many heavily-involved

creditors who will follow suit. If Jem Endicott had been a wise man he would have tried long ago to break the entail. Though there was a difficulty about it in my father's time, it could have been managed according to later lights. Now matters have settled themselves. It is clear he cannot live on at Blackhall without stock or implements or such furniture as the house contains. The place must be let, if anyone will take it in these wretched times for agriculture, for the behoof of the creditors, and poor Jem and his sisters must shift for themselves elsewhere.' He put the reasonable side of the question plainly before her.

She listened to him patiently, and then she said, 'But you don't know how much money I have or how much I am willing to lay out in this matter. I could lift ten thousand pounds without any trouble—would that do? I think you could sell out shares for me which would bring in about five thousand more. I am afraid all the rest is laid out in different colonial investments and could not be easily realised. Would ten or fifteen thousand pounds be enough at first?' she asked eagerly.

God help her! she was a very woman still, though she had grown grey under hardship and suffering.

'Lady Jones,' he said quietly, trying her, 'do you think that either I or any other respectable lawyer would allow you to fling ten thousand pounds into the sea or the fire to gratify a passing fancy? You spoke of proper security. There can be no proper security when the land is little worth in these times, and such as it is was mortgaged to its full value long before its possessor succeeded to it.'

'Then he has never had a fair chance,' she said indignantly; 'and you, his friend, object to my giving it to him.'

'I object to you or any woman—man, when it comes to that—undertaking, with my consent, an obligation you must know little or nothing about.'

'Well, you have warned me,' she said entreatingly. 'Your conscience is clear, and you may believe me when I say there is nobody to call either you or me to account for what, after all, is perfectly just and legal. I can do what I like with the money my husband left me. You will find on the least inquiry that it is entirely at my disposal. He had few relations, and he provided amply for those he had while he was still alive—and I am alone in the world.'

Her voice gave way a little as she made the statement, and he was sensible that, under the force of what he felt, he had been speaking, as it might sound, harshly to her. He resumed more gently: 'I do not for a moment dispute your right of spending your money as you think fit; I have not the smallest title to do so. All that I want is to give you my candid opinion on one of those business matters with which you, like most ladies, may not be very well acquainted. The expression of my

opinion is gratuitous, I dare say, since I do not believe for an instant that my friend Jem Endicott, whom I have always reckoned honest and honourable in the middle of his misfortunes, would agree to such a sacrifice from a woman on whom he has no farther claim than that of her landlord and friend.'

'Do you mean that he would not take the money which I am so willing to give him, when I ask him, from me?' she inquired piteously.

He was very sorry for her, though she would not trust him, and though, after the first false step, he could not tell how many more she might have taken. He hated himself for that admission, but he could not help himself, as a man of the world. It was all very well to have faith in her still, but in point of fact her history was a blank to him. Still, of this he was certain, that, whatever she might have done or left undone, she was blameless in her desire to confer this benefit on her own flesh and blood.

'I don't see that he can or ought to take it,' he was compelled to say; 'but of course I'll convey to him your most generous but—pardon me—reckless proposal, and if I am not mistaken he will dismiss it at once, with more or less of the gratitude he owes to you. Poor Jem is—well, not the most gracious of mortals, but he is not such an ingrate as not to recognise the great service you would fain render him.' He was trying to comfort her, racking his brains for convincing soothing arguments on his side of the question. 'Were he to consent—and I do not know that in this case you might not be rendering him a disservice—bringing down on him a curse instead of a blessing——'

'You may leave me to decide that,' she interrupted him coldly.

He went on apparently without heeding her. 'What I was going to say was that in all probability you would only stave off his ruin; it would be a question of time merely. The debt which has been his destruction all along would be there intact in another form, which he would be doubly bound to strive his utmost to repay. I am not a squire or a farmer myself, and I am not sure that Jem's utmost exertions where cattle and grain are in question are worth much, that his methods are the best which can be adopted in the circumstances. He has never had a fair chance, as you say, and he is as frugal and industrious as any hard-headed colonist; but he is also self-willed, dogged in the extreme, and, I suspect, old-fashioned in his ideas.' He plunged into another objection. 'If Jem were so far left to himself as to become your debtor to a large extent, with very little prospect of clearing off the debt in a reasonable time, I don't suppose it would be an advantage to his sisters, as you may imagine it would. I conclude you are interested in the whole family,' said George, trying to speak easily, taking up a

bundle of papers and fingering them in an unsuccessful effort to appear still more at his ease. 'I have observed that you have taken a liking for Lucy; well, she would be much better away from Blackhall. Neither of the sisters can get any good there. They are in an awkward position, and under bad influences.'

'I know what you mean,' she said sharply, 'but I cannot think it possible that the man has any real hold on either of the girls, least of all on Lucy. Indeed I have reason to think that if her heart has been touched it is not by him—he is the last man she would think of. The intimacy must be Celia's doing.'

He said no more. He did not wish to distress her further, and he felt that he had no right to betray Lucy in what he had merely suspected—however strongly—in reference to the appearances of the Spanish Madam.

Lady Jones was silent also, with the shadow deepening on her white face and her great grey eyes looking straight before her. It was as if she pursued his train of thought and followed it into regions which he dared not invade, taking up broken links and slipped threads which he had forgotten or could not bring forward. What did she not recall of an abandoned post, forsaken ties and duties, an evil example afforded, the forfeiture of all claim to interpose and protect those who were worse than defenceless?

He could not endure to look any longer at her sitting there with her bowed head and feeble feet. He hit on another objection. 'Jem might even think himself at liberty to indulge a foolish passion. He might marry Kitty Carew, if she would consent.'

She turned upon him swiftly. 'And what if he did?' she demanded haughtily. 'Jem is free to please himself so far as I am concerned. Is he not even to have his choice in a matter in which the poorest working-man holds it as his dearest right to choose? You have surely lived long enough in the world to know that there are much worse things in it than a young man's marrying a girl whom he cares for, facing the world with her, fighting the battle we all have to fight with her by his side. Or have people to go to the colonies to get rid of their prejudices? Carew is a good Devonshire name'—she yielded fondly to a prejudice within the instant—'a great deal better as a name than Jones, let us say,' with a sarcastic laugh which left him under the impression that the late Sir Benjamin had not been one of the well-descended Welsh Joneses but quite a different Jones. The sarcasm died out of her face and voice the next instant, and in its place came a tender remorse and a wistful reverence. 'Except,' she corrected herself slowly, 'that I do not know much about the Carews, how they bore their name, while I can give my testimony that one Jones carried his so that it was held in honour throughout a great colony. Kitty Carew,' she began again in her former earnest, dispassionate tones, 'is

clever and fairly educated. She has done her best for herself and all belonging to her. She is not a silly, helpless, vulgar creature who thinks only of self-indulgence in some form, and defines a lady as a woman who wears fine clothes, eats good food and is idle. Kitty Carew would not wreck Jem's fortunes in that way.'

'No, I don't think she would,' admitted Fielding, while he had some difficulty in throwing off the speculation in which he had been indulging while she was speaking—what sort of man had the late Sir Benjamin Jones been, that he could have won such a warm testimony from such a woman? 'I don't say,' he remarked aloud, 'that Kitty Carew would not make a good wife as she has made a good daughter; and I have sufficient confidence in Tom Carew, whether his name may have anything to do with it, as an honest independent fellow, who would not stand in a daughter's way or trouble a son-in-law. But that is not to say that she would be a suitable wife for Jem Endicott, or that this part of the county would see it to be so, far less that his sisters would be able to pull along with her, supposing she were put over their heads and installed as the mistress of Blackhall. They would not have to do with a mistress of straw in her, I can tell you. Little Kitty would be the true mistress wherever she went. She has not been a schoolma'am for nothing; and the ruling principle was in her to begin with. I have known her all her life. She has ruled the Furze Bush since her mother's death, when the daughter was a child in short frocks and elf-locks.'

'The better for her,' said Lady Jones coolly; 'she may defy this part of the county. Public opinion is not apt to be either just or generous, and the only way to treat it is to gag it, while the only way to gag it is to defy it—don't you think so?'

'No,' he said gravely, 'not unless in a cause which is greater than public opinion. This may be such a cause; I do not pretend to say; but otherwise to outrage the judgment of society is to be guilty of a very silly act, nay, a serious offence, which is only to be excused in very young people who have been goaded to extremity.'

'I dare say you are right,' she answered, so meekly for her, with such depths of contrition and unavailing regret in the meekness that his heart smote him for dealing her such a home-thrust. 'But Jem ought not always to be sacrificed for his sisters, without getting the least credit or thanks for it,' she spoke again, not only with firmness, with something like passionate indignation.

As George Fielding listened to her, a vision presented itself unsolicited to his mind. It was that of Delaval Pool frozen over with ice, inches thick, in midwinter. A good many skaters had assembled from considerable distances—among them a smallish schoolboy at home for his Christmas holidays, as it

happened, the last holidays he ever spent at home. He was in company with his elder sister, a big girl. The two attracted attention by the feats they performed on the ice. Clearly, the boy, who had been out in the world in his schoolboy fashion, and knew more of skating than the big girl who had remained at home had acquired, was the eager instructor, while she was the apt pupil. The boy Jem had been very proud of his sister's acquirements in the matter of circles and spread eagles, and of the fact that he had imparted them. He had exposed himself to some rallying on the subject from a young Cantab who was on the ground and knew the pair, and had watched them with interest. The college-lad, on his way home to Ashford, had again come across the brother and sister walking back through the frosty twilight to Blackhall. Their merry talk rang on the evening air long before he saw them. The boy was carrying both pairs of skates slung round his neck, the girl, in the gathering dusk, had her arm over his shoulder.

George roused himself with a start from his involuntary reverie to watch Lady Jones; she too had her reverie, with knitted brow and compressed lips. Was she asking herself if she had returned a stranger in her prosperity and undergone unspeakable anguish for nothing? Was she turning about in her mind whether to save Jem and Blackhall—supposing there were no other way—she must cast aside the accidental disguise with which time, absence, and suffering had furnished her, tell plainly who she had been, and risk forfeiting for ever even the slight hold she had on her family? For the Endicotts were an undisciplined, inconsiderate race, and Jem was one of the most headstrong and perverse of the number. It was quite possible that no recent prosperity on her part and willingness to share it with them would prevent him from repudiating his sister, refusing to forgive the scandal and shame she had helped to bring on her family, and declining to touch a penny of the fortune which he might persist in regarding as part of the wages of her disgrace. He might denounce and defame her as her own father had done, and put a final end even to such intercourse on mistaken premises as existed at present between her and him and her sisters. That would be to bid a last farewell to such a desperate illusion as George Fielding could conceive an unhappy woman indulging—of watching over her people from a little distance, befriending them without their suspecting it, doing it under the fiction of common acquaintance, of Jem's tenant—an eccentric, rich, and childless widow, showing favour where the fancy took her, always at hand to come to their aid in worldly trouble like the present, or in the yet more personal and tragic episodes of sickness and death.

George Fielding could not satisfy himself whether Lady Jones had come to a decision sitting there in his private room, or whether, as he was more inclined to think, she left herself to

be guided by the course of events. He only knew that she sighed a dreary, heavy sigh, and then got up and spoke as if to mask the sigh, for she had not been a woman who had accustomed herself to groan and weep either over her trials or her errors. 'Very well, Mr. Fielding,' she said, with a successful effort to recover her calmness. 'There is nothing more to be said or done just now. You will let Jem—my landlord—know that I am desirous of lending him money to relieve him. That will be better and more agreeable for all parties than if I were to communicate with him personally. You will make me acquainted with the result as soon as possible. But remember, whatever happens, the bailiffs must be got out of Blackhall without loss of time.'

She clung with a woman's tenacity to her purpose in spite of every argument to the contrary. Her mind even showed an affinity to Lucy's, in her blind terror at the pacific bailiffs.

Lady Jones had not to wait long, not even for George Fielding's writing or riding over to Oxcleeve to give her the substance of his communication to Jem, and Jem's reception of it. Jem became his own messenger, and called on his tenant at the Court. It was the first time he had accomplished the common civility. It was also the first time he had crossed the threshold of Blackhall since the bailiffs had bestowed their company upon him. He wound in and out among the scattered cottages and goose-greens to escape neighbourly salutations, and passed the Furze Bush without once raising his head, like a crushed, broken man.

Lady Jones welcomed him with a palpitating kindness which put both him and herself out. He could not account for it, and it puzzled and tormented him; while she felt it must be unaccountable to him, and the feeling robbed her of the little calmness she could command. She would have had him sit down in her chair. She would have waited on him in what must have been Australian bush fashion; but he would not sit down at all—still less would he be waited upon. He stood, with his hat in his hand, beneath the portrait of the late Sir Benjamin, and hardly even looked at her.

'I do not know what to say or how to thank you, Lady Jones,' he began awkwardly. 'Of course it is wonderfully kind of you even to think of such a thing; but how you came to think of it—what put it into your head to make such an offer—I cannot comprehend.'

'Never mind what put it into my head,' she said breathlessly, standing beside him with her limbs trembling under her, 'since it is there. Only think what a disappointment it will be to me if you refuse to avail yourself of my—my assistance, when I have set my heart on helping you. I suppose George Fielding told you how much in earnest I was, how greatly I wished it?'

'Yes, Fielding told me the extraordinary story, and I could

hardly believe my ears. I have come to express my gratitude for your goodness—I never heard of such goodness—though of course it is out of my power to accept it.'

'Oh! don't say that,' she cried, clutching at the table beside her to support her, 'and don't call it good. You know I am rich; I do not know what to do with my money. I have nothing else I care for to lay it out upon. Why should you not have the use of it as well as another, especially when it would be giving me a great pleasure, when I should be the favoured person. It was too bad in George Fielding'—she broke off pettishly in her vexation and in the long strain on her nerves—'to set you against my plan. He always was—ever since I knew him, at least, which you may not reckon very long after all'—she broke off with a nervous laugh—'a man to raise objections, full of difficulties and scruples.'

'Fielding has only done what he considers to be his duty,' said Jem gruffly. But she thought she had moved him a little, that there was a lurking hesitation and hankering after her proposal under his stolid manner, even when he said slowly the next minute, 'How could I take your money, Lady Jones, when there is hardly the most distant likelihood of my paying back the principal in the course of our two lives? In these bad times I could hardly expect to do more in return for what you are, with such singular disinterestedness, pressing on me than just hold on, and perhaps pay the interest of the loan. It would be barefaced robbery to take you—a woman, my tenant—to my advantage, not yours, as you have been all along—at your word!'

'No, it would not, after you have told me the truth,' she argued, as she had argued to George Fielding. 'I don't want to be paid back—at least not till it is quite convenient for you. I can do without the interest and let it lie over and accumulate with the rest, if it is the payment of that which alarms you. I shall never miss it.'

'Impossible! Don't talk stuff,' growled Jem, in the most natural manner in the world.

She saw that she had gone too far, but she was also sensible that she was tempting him—for his own good, she believed. He was conservative to the last fibre of his nature. He had clung to Blackhall when he had nothing else to cling to. He had been as fond of the house and moor as if they had held only pleasant memories instead of painful associations for him. He would have given his life to have kept the old place. He would willingly have gone on grinding and pinching to clear it from its overwhelming burdens, as he had been doing for years now. When the question was whether he should not be giving his honour instead of his life, if he agreed to the incredible, tantalising offer of ready money to pay off his worst debts, to be *had for the* taking, nay, to be forced upon him if he would con-

sent to the flattering importunity, he was tossed on a sea of miserable doubt. Should he shut his eyes and accept the goods the gods had sent him, or should he trample them under foot as a trap for his credit, his peace of mind and self-respect—a manifest snare of the Devil?

Lady Jones perceived her advantage and made the best of it. 'There have been Endicotts in Blackhall for centuries—from time immemorial, I have heard,' she said.

He nodded.

'Why should you be the last? I don't like to think of old families being severed from the soil in which they took root and flourished for many generations.'

'And declined, till one of the members is the impoverished beggar that I am,' he said bitterly.

'Yes,' she owned quietly; 'but does it not strike you that you owe it to all who have gone before you to do what you can to raise up the family again, to put new life, new spirit into it? Times will not always be bad. How do you know that they are not going to take a sudden turn for the better? You may be rejecting the opportunity, which I am putting in your power, to redeem the fortunes of the Endicotts.'

'I don't believe that agriculture will look up in this country for many a day, if it ever recover from its long depression,' said sturdy Jem. 'And I will tell you that since I came into the property I have been doing my best—a poor best, I dare say—but it was all I could do, to work some improvement; and this is all that it has come to—the bailiffs in possession of Blackhall, and a stranger disposed to give me charity.'

She put up her hand as if to ward off a blow too late, and drew a long, pained breath. 'I do not feel like a stranger,' she said in a low, hurt tone. 'You have let me take the Court on my own terms, you have received me at Blackhall, your sister Lucy has consented to be my friend, and surely it is not either giving or receiving charity to suffer me to lend you money on a bond with reasonable interest.'

He stood silent, immovable, except that, having none of Lucy's footstools to kick out of his way, he mechanically kicked aside a newspaper which was lying on the floor. He was evidently debating the question, and so sore was the struggle within him, that the sweat-drops stood on his brow.

She, too, was agitated beyond concealment. She had sunk into a chair and been sitting opposite to him during most of the discussion. Now in her excitement she rose and stood again beside him. At that moment, in spite of her feeble gait, white hair, blanched face, and widow's dress, the family likeness between the tall man and woman with the straight brows, dark eyes, and noses of the same Roman type, standing side by side in the old-fashioned, plain, square room, which seemed a fit setting for them, was striking—far more so than any faint traits

of resemblance which existed between Jem and his younger sisters. 'I am a very lonely woman,' she said, breaking the silence, and speaking with concentrated sadness, 'but I had once a brother, a schoolboy brother, of whom I was fond, who was fond of me.'

He had given an involuntary start, and was looking at her keenly, searchingly, with something which resembled wild, fierce questioning in his glance. It appeared to deprive her of what strength she possessed, for she tottered and swayed where she stood, till he cried in alarm, and with a man's impatience, 'Take care, Lady Jones, you will fall. You are over-exerting yourself. Why should you put yourself about like this for what is no concern of yours?' Every tone and word expressed that he was satisfied he had never set eyes on this white-faced, white-haired, infirm woman before she came to the Court in the spring.

'I will sit down when you bid me,' she said, with a quivering smile, suiting the action to the word, 'and you will do what I ask you, for the sake of that boy-brother of mine whom I lost long ago, who would not have scorned my advances. He would have let me do what I could to help him and so be happy in my own way.'

'You are a good soul,' he could not resist saying, taking one of her hands and wringing it, controlling his own emotion with difficulty. 'I don't deserve what you are doing for me—I tell you so. But if I let it be as you say and give myself and the old place one more chance, you will remember that the bargain was of your making, however you may rue it—you will not forget how you tried me?'

'I will not forget,' she said softly, 'and I will never rue my bargain.'

Among Jem Endicott's faults there had been no room for personal vanity. Had it been otherwise, even the circumstance that he was doubly, trebly, fenced against such an impression, might not have saved him from a most mistaken and embarrassing suspicion. Jem was spared the affronting blunder. It would have seemed to him the height of sardonic irony where he was concerned, and the next thing to profanation in reference to the woman before him, to have indulged in the insulting supposition that she was the victim of a tender passion for a man considerably her junior—for him, Jem Endicott.

As Jem was neither imaginative nor speculative he rested in the conclusion that it was as Lady Jones had said. She was a rich widow, independent, and alone in the world. She did not know what to do with her money (happy ignorance!). She had taken a fancy to his sister Lucy. She would have been sorry, as she had told him, to see an old family and an old place parted. Such public-spiritedness was rare, but it was not unexampled.

When George Fielding heard that Jem Endicott had come

to terms with Lady Jones—evidently as Lady Jones, and not as a more privileged or forbidden person—he shook his head ruefully. 'She has done for him, I am afraid, with the best intentions—these things are always done with the best intentions. He will never be able to repay the money, and the debt will hang round his neck like a millstone, worse than any which has gone before it, for it has been a debt of his own incurring, and it has been taken on in the face of all which should have held him back. There will be an awful exposure and reckoning between them some day. He will say she deceived him into incurring obligations at her hands, and she will not be able to deny the charge. The whole thing is on a false and wrong foundation.'

CHAPTER XXX.

STRUCK DOWN.

LADY JONES found that though she had gained her point, she was not to be allowed to be happy in her own way. She might have done good by stealth, but she was to be made to blush for it. She had raised a storm about her ears. The presence of the bailiffs at Blackhall had not been more widely known than their speedy departure was noised abroad, and as the second circumstance was much more wonderful than the first, it had its due share of attention, while the explanation of the mystery—strange enough in itself—was shrewdly guessed, or leaked out somehow. Lady Jones was the person who had rid Blackhall of the bailiffs. She had bought them off. She was backing her no longer unlucky landlord to a fabulous extent. It was uncommonly generous of her, and it was to be hoped that she would not confine her lavish favours to an unworthy recipient. It was a shame of Jem Endicott to consent to prey on a woman, a widow, his tenant! Pay his debts! As well attempt to fill up Delaval Pool, which, as everybody knew, was bottomless in some places. Bad as old Hugh Endicott had been, you would not have found him guilty of such a scurvy trick.

It was not Jem who grew restive or 'rode on the top of his commission,' that extraordinary mode of excess in horsemanship and general progress. It was positively pathetic—humiliating, George Fielding called it in his discontent—to see the manner in which Jem tried to accommodate himself to his new position, that of a man who owed his retaining Blackhall to the liberality of a woman, a stranger, whose substitute and puppet he must thenceforth be.

He mastered himself and came continually and consulted her, as he had never consulted anyone before, on his prope

business. She gave him good advice, being herself a quick-witted, observant woman of some experience, and did not season it with a grain of patronage or overbearing interference. There was no need that it should gall him. He could not avoid discovering, notwithstanding his self-depreciation, that she liked to have him at the Court, that he was always welcome; so he went and sat with her as the Rev. Miles North was addicted to sitting in her rooms, and as Jem had sat nowhere out of his own house before, except in the bar-room and parlour of the Furze Bush. He was not very lively company, and he could not say that he exactly enjoyed the performance, which was a novel form of constraint to him, but insensibly a degree of intimacy grew up between him and his creditor. He acquired a habit of appealing to her, and putting confidence in her as other people were apt to do. For without any consciousness of the fact on her part, she had the gift of being sympathetic and of inspiring confidence.

It was not Lucy who quarrelled with Lady Jones for delivering Jem when he was all but checkmated. Lucy was not only heartily thankful; she was secretly proud of the result of her interference. Her friend had saved Jem and all of them; and she was ready to go to Lady Jones, every time she could get away from Celia, with sweet shy caresses, which her ladyship, though she was not naturally a demonstrative woman, returned with interest.

It was Mrs. Reynolds who in the first place fell on her neighbour across The Green. Her large presence appeared positively to fill the Court, while she proceeded to hold up her black-gloved hands in amazement and protest. 'My dear creature, what is this I hear? Are you out of your senses? If you will throw away a large sum of money, there are many excellent charities, and there is always the Clergy Relief Fund. But to attempt to bolster up your landlord, who ought rather to be benefiting you—a man who has been practically a bankrupt ever since he came into this wretched property—a disagreeable, low-lived, hulking fellow! I hear such stories of his sitting evening after evening in the Furze Bush—one of those perfectly untrustworthy, disreputable Endicotts—there was never anything half so foolish done in this world! Why did you not send for me when he had the unwarrantable impertinence to apply to you to get the bailiffs out? I could have given him his answer. If you had asked me I could have told you.'

'But you see I did not ask you, because I thought I was old enough to judge for myself,' said Lady Jones, trying to possess her soul in patience and to bear in mind that it was Mrs. Reynolds who had, however unwittingly, smoothed the way for her return to Oxcleeve, and her subsequent rescue of Jem and Blackhall.

'Oh, we poor widows who have lost our natural protectors

and counsellors can never be said to be able to take care of ourselves, though we may be fit to keep guard over the welfare of each other, if we are permitted,' said Mrs. Reynolds with a slight air of offence. 'And that reminds me,' she began again with renewed zeal, 'of what you in your innocence—for you are very innocent and simple, if you will excuse me for saying so—may not have dreamt of, something which you may never have taken into consideration—I declare I don't believe it has once occurred to you that your landlord, however much of a lout and a boor he may be, is a young man! I believe some people would regard him, in the light of his size and his tolerable features, fine-looking, though he is far from the style of man I admire. You know how people will talk when a single man and a widow are in question.'

Lady Jones's first answer to this speech was a stare of pure astonishment and bewilderment—her next, a peal of discomfiting laughter, which Mrs. Reynolds inevitably resented more indignantly than any other scouting of her advice. She had never heard Lady Jones laugh like that before. It might be hysterical; otherwise, it was positively improper, in the dress she wore and under the circumstances.

The laugher was ready to express her contrition the moment she could subdue the unseemly merriment, but she was nearly set off into another peal by recalling sundry items to Mrs. Reynolds. 'I am old enough to be his mother—no, not quite that of course, still much, much older, six or eight years at least, and I am absolutely venerable, compared to him, in experience. Oh, poor Jem, to be matched with a widow six or eight years his senior, who cannot walk and is hoary-headed!'

'Years are nothing in such infatuations; neither, I believe, are personal defects and infirmities, to which I should not have alluded, of course, if you had not mentioned them,' said Mrs. Reynolds with a mixture of sternness and gloom. 'Jem, indeed!' she was saying to herself as she prepared to take her leave. She had a horrible fear that she might have been dreadfully deceived in Lady Jones. She did not know what to think, unless colonial manners were very strange, or the head of the late Sir Benjamin's widow was turned, she had shown such obstinacy and levity.

Lady Jones's next assailant startled her still more, though the assault was of a totally different kind. In the course of the following afternoon, Nettie Barnes hurried down the garden path while the Barnes's carriage stood at the gate. 'I am come to beg your pardon, Lady Jones,' called cheery Nettie in at the open window, 'and to ask if you will do father a great favour at the same time. He is ashamed to ask it, but necessity has no law, he says. He is so lame with gout that he cannot get in or out of the carriage without the greatest difficulty, while he must speak half a dozen words to you. He has driven to Oxleeve on

purpose, and he will be so much obliged if you will go out to him, since he cannot come in to you. The weather is dry and not cold—he will not detain you a couple of minutes.'

'Has Mrs. Reynolds brought all the Barnes tribe upon me?' reflected Lady Jones angrily, for she was originally neither meek nor patient—'I did not think Greg Barnes would have lent himself to her intolerable impertinence.' She went out as she was sitting, without suffering Nettie to summon a servant to get her a shawl and a bonnet; she did not accept the offer of the girl's arm though she had really liked her; she walked slowly down the flagged path, and prepared to stand coldly and stiffly by the carriage door, without any attempt to hide her sense that a liberty had been taken with her—waiting till the occupant of the carriage had delivered himself of the ill-judged remonstrance he had come to make.

But it was impossible to resist Greg Barnes as he leant half-way out of the carriage with both his hands held out. 'Lady Jones,' he said, 'I don't care what you think of me—call me an intrusive, ill-bred, old country bumpkin if you like—but I could not rest till I had come and told you what I think of your goodness, and to thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done. I would have given a good deal to be able to do it myself, and to hold out a helping hand in any way to young Endicott, who has been as hard-driven as ever poor lad found himself. But, in the first place, he would not take my hand, and in the second, I could not hold it out in justice to my family. I am an old man and not a rich one, though some people choose to make me out so. I am suffering like my neighbours; Providence has not seen fit to send me a lad, only a couple of lasses—fine enough lasses, though I say it—eh, Nettie!—I have nothing to say against my two lasses, but they as well as their mother have to be provided for, while lads might have shifted for themselves, more or less. So a stranger has to step in and prevent one of the oldest families in this part of the country from being cleared out root and branch—a good riddance, some people have the cheek to say, but it would have been nothing of the kind, madam—mete out to them, or to any one of us, a strict measure of our deserts, and I should like to see what would happen. Bless you! I remember the Endicotts of Blackhall for three generations. The first generation, your landlord's grandfather and grandmother and his granduncles and grandaunts, were as decent a lot of people as you could wish to see. Unluckily for those that came after them, they were not a long-lived race and they did not two of them settle in Devonshire. If the next generation went wrong, the world stoned them more heavily than they deserved; even Wild Hugh was not so black as he has been painted, and he had an awful price to pay. Young Jem has been made the scapegoat, and he has been called on to suffer, not for *his own sins*, but for the sins of those who went before him. You

deserve the gratitude of every true Devonshire man for giving the scapegoat a sight of land when he was in the deepest water. Now, madam, though I'm twice as lame as you are, if I may hint at lameness in connection with a lady, I would have managed to hobble on two sticks to your door, and not had the effrontery to ask you to wait on me, but I feared my bulk, that I might get fast in your gate or your door, or that either of my sticks might give way and I might have a bad fall and be laid up, and become a nuisance to you—another pensioner on your bounty, when you have already done enough, more than enough, to serve your kind.'

She said not a word—she only hung her head, which she had been carrying a little proudly when she came out, and let him take her hands and shake them with hearty respect. He thought her the shyest of good women of her years.

And she, when she was in her house again, shrank into the darkest corner and hid her face in her hands. Greg Barnes to have waited at her gate to praise and thank her, and shake her by the hand! It was in ignorance, of course, and she ought not to have permitted it, but she could not have imagined even this version of an interview between herself and Hugh Endicott's old neighbour and defender.

A man may do rash and careless things, gambling with his health, and recklessly risking it for ninety-and-nine times, and the hundredth his hereditary enemy, gout or rheumatism, consumption, heart complaint, brain fever, after having been so long defied with impunity, may leap upon him and overcome him at a bound, compelling him to pay the full bill and close the account with time and with his fellows.

The autumn passed early into the winter this year, and the first spreading out of the great snow sheet on the moor happened before Martinmas. But the experience was by no means unprecedented—poor Endicott, for one—though, instead of being that mythical person 'the oldest inhabitant,' he was still a young man—had undergone it a good many times. The only difference between these early and long winters and the present was that he had then carried such a pack load of care upon his back that the weight of it might have broken down the strongest of the old packmen's bridges that were left across the Bar; and its effects upon him had been that it did not appear to be of the slightest personal consequence whether the sun shone or the rain poured, or the snow was borne in blinding, stinging white particles on the 'whuddering' blast. He was in circumstances when the weather becomes less than nothing—when if a man notices it at all he can laugh at it with a grim glee. Now his back was somewhat straightened from its load, and he lifted himself up, looked about him, remarked that the cold had come unseasonably early this year, shivered sympathetically, and felt the bitter wind search to his marrow.

It is possible that among the great discoveries in anæsthetics which the world of medicine has been making lately, some wise physician may discover that mental trouble so numbs a man's bodily faculties as to render him not merely insensible but impervious to the consequences of exposure and hardship; and it is only when the counter-irritation is withdrawn, and his mind is eased that he feels the bodily evil and knocks under to it. This theory may be as true as the other, that unexpected relief from worry and the prospect of better days will stimulate a man and bring him back from the brink of the grave.

Anyhow, Jem Endicott was not going to cry out like the molly-coddles because he felt and shrank from the severity of the weather with what was for him extraordinary sensitiveness this autumn. He buried his unusual sensations in the depths of his consciousness as things to be ashamed of, and breasted the worst of the storms and of the moor together when even Beaver saw no cause for the wanton exposure of his person, and grumbled to Sally on the waste, when the sheep, the cattle, and the ponies 'did not ought to want help.'

Jem caught a bad cold and went about as hoarse as a raven, and took it amiss if anybody remarked on his hoarseness or presumed to notice his entire loss of appetite. Celia had to beg Lucy not to present Jem with another box of lozenges, for she was sure he would not content himself with ostentatiously leaving it unopened as he had left the last—he would 'pitch' it at the officious donor's head.

A day came when even Jem Endicott could control his ill-used body no longer. He had not been able to lie down in bed or to shut his eyes for coughing during the whole of the previous night. Yet, strange to say—and he considered it as not simply odd but unfair—he could not get out of bed or walk across the floor without running the risk of reeling and falling, on the following morning. He was in violent pain, he was gasping for breath, while his eyes were glittering and his lips parched with fever. 'I say, Lucy,' he hailed that much-put-upon young woman, who had treated his non-appearance at the breakfast-table with the most respectful forbearance before she at length ventured, in growing alarm, to peep into her brother's room, 'something queer has come to me. I've tried at least half a dozen times to get up and I declare I can't; I've lost the way somehow!' with a forlorn attempt at a smile from Jem, who smiled so seldom. 'Perhaps it is because I'm choking for some reason, and there is a stab in my side every time I cough, so that I'm mortally afraid I shall cry out like a baby. But you need not mind; I dare say it is because I'm not used to being out of sorts. I *am* a beastly duffer to give way to it.'

Lucy, in the height of her consternation, showed instinctive judgment. She did not run to Celia as she was prone to do, for *Celia would* not have believed her. She never did believe, if

she could help it, anything she did not care to be told. Instead of hastening to see what was wrong and doing her best to set it right, she would have detained Lucy to mock at her. Lucy did wisely in fetching Beaver instead. The old farm servant stumped up to Jem's bedroom, followed closely by his wife, took one look at his master, dismissing with indifference Jem's angry half-stifled 'Hullo, what are you seeking here, Beaver, and you, too, Sally? It is that goose Lucy.'

'Nay, now, measter, she beant none of a goose; you lie ztill there till I fetch doctor. You lie ztill, I zay,' as Jem made a futile effort to rise and slam the door in the face of the intruders. 'You ha' got the inflammation on the lungs—plain to be zeen—zame as took the cow Daisy. If zo be you move from your bed you'll be no better than a dead mon, zure's fate, afore night. More than that, you'll ha' to lie there a mort o' days, afore you rise up and walk across door step again. I'm bund to tell you.'

'Oh, Beaver,' cried Lucy in the utmost dismay, 'how can you say such things, before him too?'

'Because I'm bund to, miss,' said Beaver stoutly, 'when a man's life is in the zcales. More by token, I never zaid ahint a man's back what I wouldn't zay his face. And now I'll take the Dragon hissen and ride neck and crop, and never ztop though he cast every zhoe atween this and doctor's.'

'Beaver, I forbid you to take the Dragon,' panted Jem.

'And what'll hinder me?' cried Beaver defiantly. 'You ain't fit to vight me, when it's the nighest chance vor your life I be a-galloping after.' He threw the end of the sentence over his shoulder undauntedly, as he quitted the room without further delay.

When the doctor arrived, his verdict was even more alarming than Beaver's. Jem was labouring under the worst form of pleurisy. If he could be pulled through, it would only be by a hard and prolonged struggle. He was in considerable danger, and must continue so for some time. He stood in urgent need of good nursing and the utmost care. It was the doctor's duty to warn all concerned, even as it had been Beaver's to speak out.

Jem was too ill to take in the whole truth, or if he took it in, he made no sign at first, but lay and strove to digest the tough morsel in silence, as he battled with the hitherto unknown experience of bodily anguish.

The new event of Jem's violent illness acted characteristically on the different characters of the two sisters. Celia, forced to accept the doctor's opinion, was first angry as at a personal injury. Why had Jem gone and got ill when they were hardly free from the worry of his miserable affairs which had at last brought the bailiffs into the house? He was never like other men. Those connected with him had not a breathing space and

were much to be pitied. A cowed mood followed Celia's fit of resentment, and Celia cowed turned out, if anything, a more uncomfortable person to deal with than Celia in full feather. She wandered about aimlessly, meddling with everything and everybody to no purpose, relieving her disconsolateness by finding fault with all the little services Lucy sought to render, while Celia showed herself incapable of any service, however small. In fact, her cleverness took flight just as her self-control abandoned her. Accustomed only to think of herself her whole life long, and to do it admirably, poor Celia fell short—lamentably short—when the question was of caring for another. Any bungling attempt which she made was piteous to see. But she hardly made an attempt; she confined herself to railing at things in general, and to giving way to the most discouraging, dismal views of the case—she, who a few hours before had refused to give credit to the possibility of serious illness coming near a person in whom its presence would be inconvenient to her—Celia.

Lucy went about with a blanched face, but kept back those plentiful tears of hers more heroically than she had ever kept them before, and succeeded in carrying out some of Sally Beaver's instructions in a way that astonished Sally. This was because Lucy in her humility obeyed Sally implicitly, and gave herself up to the object she had in hand—anything which would do poor Jem good—with complete self-surrender.

'That is all wrong, Lucy,' Celia kept assailing her sister. 'How do you know about making linseed poultices and cooking beef tea? I can't tell you, but I can see it is all wrong.'

'It beant,' said Sally bluntly: 'you go and take up your fal-lal of frilling and trimming, or your book again. Zee if that will keep you ztill and leave other volk at liberty to wait on measter. You let Miss Lucy alone. She do be coming on finely; she'll learn to mix and spread a poultice in no time, she will, if she have the chance.'

Lucy was leaning over Jem, toiling ineffectually to pile up the pillows, so as to let him breathe more freely, while Celia had never done more than peep in at the door, and shrink perceptibly from what was to her the sorry and humiliating spectacle of the strong man struck down in a day, and wrestling for bare breath, like any grey-beard soon to draw his last sigh, or feeble child in whom life was but faint and flickering from the first.

'Lady Jones!' muttered Jem, struggling into a sitting posture, and throwing up his arms, like a swimmer when he feels his strength is failing him and that he is sinking in the abyss.

This naming of his tenant might be little better than an accident, or if Jem meant anything by it, the words might signify that he desired her to be told of his illness, lest she should think he had failed to keep an appointment with her. But Lucy caught at the reference, and the moment Sally Beaver could

release her, snatched up her garden hat and, without jacket or gloves, ran faster than she had run on the day of the bailiffs' visit to seek counsel and sympathy from her friend, to tell her Jem had spoken of her.

Lucy had not argued without her host—Lady Jones was on her feet instantly.

'Jem ill!—with pleurisy, bad pleurisy! You must let me come over and help to nurse him. I have seen a good deal of illness; I shall know what to do. I hope to be of use to him and to spare you. My bad walking does not matter so much when I have somebody to run my errands; and you will run them for Jem's sake. I can sit day and night by him, if it is necessary; I don't need much sleep, and I am a light sleeper. Oh, yes, Lucy, we'll bring him round, please God. Many a man has had pleurisy badly and got over it, though it is serious enough, and hard upon him, poor fellow! Can Sally Beaver do without one of my servants? If so, it will be better, for a stranger may be in the way. Have you the right beef in the house for beef-tea, chickens for soup, plenty of milk and eggs? —we shall have to rely on them principally in the meantime. And did he ask for me?—really and truly, Lucy?' cried Lady Jones, looking wonderfully young in her sympathy. 'Oh, I am so glad—and grieved, too, of course, for your brother's illness. But I am happy to think he thought of me and was ready to apply to me, as a neighbour and friend, in his strait.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE BRINK OF THE SHORELESS SEA.

All the time Lady Jones had been speaking she had been busy preparing for her departure. She had taken Lucy into her bedroom to put up a change of clothes, with the expedition of a woman used to think and act for herself on an emergency. She had laid out her dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, and bethought herself of a supply of night-lights which she had at hand.

Her directions to her servants were equally concise and to the point. Her pony-carriage was at Ashford for some slight repairs, and she would not wait till another conveyance was found for her. When Lucy, anxious as she was to return to her brother, showed a little hesitation at incurring the responsibility of taking a tottering woman, clinging to her arm, across the various goose-greens and up and down the miniature lanes which lay between the Court and Blackhall, Lady Jones dismissed the objection impatiently.

'But what if you fall, dear Lady Jones? I may not be able to pick you up and drag you along, and, oh dear! Jem will be so angry if you come to any harm through me. Don't you think he has enough to do with that dreadful breathlessness and pain and cough—oh, how he coughs! as if he would die the next minute—without his putting himself into a passion about my letting you walk and your tumbling down or something?' ended poor Lucy, unconscious of accomplishing a ludicrous anticlimax.

'I shan't tumble down, and I shall be quite well and strong again when I have sat down for five minutes. And what although I did fall and could not get up again? I could always crawl on my hands and knees. I would willingly do that to reach Blackhall, when your brother has called for me.'

Lady Jones was an extraordinary woman, extraordinary in her energy and her power of attachment. She had not miscalculated her strength or her capacity for rallying. Though she reached her destination in a state of prostration, which was next to the last straw that must break Lucy's back and deprive her of what wits were left her, Lady Jones recovered with the marvellous celerity of a strong will and a constitution which, however shattered, had originally been robust and elastic. That Celia was not mortally offended by the presence of the interloper was a great point gained. Privately, Lucy was of opinion that Celia was only too thankful for such an available reinforcement of the domestic forces, though she did say in an undertone while Lady Jones was still lying back in the first chair she had reached, undergoing the process of recovery from what was to her the enormous fatigue of a small amount of walking, 'Was a sick and dying man not enough, that you should bring a dilapidated woman to fall ill here?'

'Your brother is not a dying man, I trust,' interposed Lady Jones, the instant her faintness subsided, 'and I am only knocked up for the moment. You see I am better, almost well again, already. You will find that I can stand a great deal of wear and tear yet, more than most people who have all their faculties, as people say, I ought to add that I consider you have granted me a great favour in allowing me to come over and do what I can for my landlord.'

Jem was tossing in a restless sleep when Lady Jones entered his room, and did not fully wake for some time. She might have been figuring in his dreams, for he appeared to take it as a matter of course when he found her by his bed, so that no explanation or apology was called for. Jem was not what is called a good patient with any of his nurses, but he was better and more submissive with Lady Jones than with Lucy and the Beavers.

The only other disparaging comment which Celia made was *in private to* Lucy. Then it appeared that she had taken up

Mrs. Reynolds's ground. 'Do you think she can have taken a fancy for him? It would be outrageous; but there are no fools like old ones and it is the only way to account for her conduct. It might not be a bad dodge for him, if he recover sufficiently, to marry her. I don't see how it would answer for us—for me especially, since you seem to have slipped into her good graces.'

'What!' cried Lucy, her eye enlarging, and her mouth diminishing, 'and poor Jem lying as ill as he can be, and she what she is, and ten years older than he at the least? Oh, Celia, how can you do it? How have you the heart to say such things, and what does it signify what becomes of us, if Jem is dying, as you said a moment ago?' The pent-up tears burst forth in a flood.

'My saying it won't make Jem die, you fool,' said Celia sullenly. 'I am sure I don't want him to die; it would be as disagreeable and inconvenient a proceeding as every other. But if he should die in spite of all that can be done to keep him alive, I do think it signifies a good deal what becomes of us. It won't help him in another world, if there be another world, for us not to waste a thought on our crying necessities. The question is whether we should be worse off inheriting next to nothing, or left to the tender mercies of Lady Jones, with her inheriting the nothing as his widow? I suppose she would still retain the provision made for her by her first husband, the Australian sheep-farmer—and convict, for anything I can tell.'

'Oh, Celia!' cried Lucy, again putting her hands over her ears and fleeing from the most distant echo of the scathing words.

There was a trying period of suspense when nothing, not even the excellent nursing brought into the field by Lady Jones, which the doctor could not praise too highly and Sally Beaver ceased to be jealous of, in sheer admiration, seemed likely to stay Jem from his headlong course to the grave. Even his chief nurse, who had shown herself so strong-minded and courageous, lost hope and let fall despairing words, when her patient could not hear, of 'too late,' 'no blessing on her nursing,' 'a fate against which it was vain to fight.'

George Fielding rode over every morning to inquire for Jem, and, when he heard who was installed by the sick man, sat dumb. From the date of that piece of information his offers to remain and sit up with the sick man ceased. He never even alighted from his horse, and so far from asking to see Jem, George did not even request to speak with one of the Miss Endicotts, which would only have been natural under the circumstances. He dreaded lest word or look of his should precipitate a catastrophe. 'The discovery would kill him in his precarious state, I dare say,' he reflected, 'but perhaps if he forgave her and died in peace, it would be the best thing which

could happen.' Still matters must take their course; George Fielding dared not, as he was a short-sighted sinner, presume to intermeddle. Let who would take it upon him to enact a small Providence, he had not the assurance or the daring. He would not expose the woman he had once loved dearly; and as to complicating and cumbering her efforts—to whatever they tended—her path was steep and rugged enough without his adding to her burden.

The Rev. Miles North came also and saw Lucy in *déshabille*, with all her little dainty devices and artless artifices cast aside—Lucy pale, worn and fragile-looking, in spite of Lady Jones's standing in the breach, her yellow hair pushed back and ruffled, her blue eyes dim with incessant weeping, save when she was with Jem, her dress crumpled and disordered.

Lucy looked helplessly in her clergyman's face.

'Oh, will he die? will he die, Mr. North?' she cried, hanging on Miles's words as if he were the lord of life and death. 'My Jem, I used to think I was ill-used because he was moody and grumpy—as I called it to myself—he who had so much to try and trouble him. Oh! if he could only come down from his room and go out and in and be moody and grumpy again! And I have been wicked, and disobeyed and deceived him. Yes, indeed, Mr. North,' said Lucy, with remorseful horror-stricken eyes, 'I don't wish anybody to pity me and think better of me than I deserve—though I am bad, I am not so bad as that. But now I shall never be able to make amends, to tell him all and ask him to forgive me.'

'My dear Miss Lucy,' said the young vicar, with his heart very soft and full of commiseration, as he still held the hand she had given him, led her to a seat and sat down beside her, 'you judge yourself too harshly.'

He was persuaded that she referred to some temporary passage in her foolish association with his cousin Tony, which at this moment he was convinced had arisen from mere girlish ignorance and waywardness, easy enough to comprehend in a poor girl who had no mother—worse than none—and was in the hands of an elder sister so bold, defiant and altogether irreverent and objectionable as was Celia Endicott. It was impossible to be anything save gentle with Lucy in her extreme distress. 'You know we are all far too apt to fail our best friends—both earthly and heavenly,' he told her. 'The first may not always be able to hear our confessions, which is a great misfortune, no doubt, but from the last we are sure of forgiveness, if we are but in earnest in asking for it.'

'It is very good of you to say so,' said Lucy with mournful meekness, thinking how different his tone was from that of the temptress Celia, to whom she had just hinted at the cruel aggravation of her sisterly grief.

'What? Still harping on the beggarly five pounds?' Celia

had said. 'What on earth does it matter to Jem now? If he is not to carry anything with him out of the world, he is quit of his debts with the rest. As for your friend Tony, should he ever come down upon you for the little accommodation he gave you, as no doubt he might when he was hard up, I dare say he will not ask it in the meantime, or for a long time to come. He has fled our near neighbourhood. He may be a vulture, or carrion crow, but he cannot be said to haunt the house of sickness and impending death. I suppose he reckons that's more in his cousin the parson's way. You are an adept at tormenting yourself, and so lamentably silly about trifles!'

'Can you do nothing for Jem, Mr. North?' besought Lucy again, from her enormous faith in Miles North's power with God and man. 'Can you suggest nothing which we may not have tried?' She drew nearer to him, and spoke in an awed whisper, 'Oh, will you pray for poor Jem?'

'My dear Miss Lucy,' repeated Miles North, greatly moved, 'I am ready to do anything in the world—anything in my power,' he added, by a discreet after-thought—for you, or your brother. God knows I am; if I could only be of the least use, nothing would make me happier. I came over to ask how Mr. Endicott was, and to put my services and the services of the Church at his disposal, should he desire them. You tell me he is perpetually dozing and wandering in his mind, so that you do not think he could follow any reading. If another time is more convenient, you have only to let me know. Day or night it will be the same to me. If you will trust me to sit up with him, I shall be only too glad, and I pledge myself to attend closely to the doctor's orders. I could at least relieve more competent nurses. Besides, I am something of a medical man myself. Many clergymen are. I have had to attend to the bodily as well as the spiritual wants of my poorer parishioners, and prescribe for them, both here and elsewhere, before I came to Oxcleeve.' He paused for a moment and then added earnestly, 'You may be very sure my prayers are yours.'

'Oh, thank you!' she said, with heartfelt gratitude.

How could he help coming constantly to soothe and comfort her, if he could do nothing else? How could she help being a little comforted by his unremitting, tender attentions?

Lady Jones was sitting beside Jem about ten days after his attack. She was looking at him sorrowfully as he lay with his eyes shut in what approached to a comatose state. That day the doctor, at her suggestion, had brought another physician, summoned from Exeter, to see his patient. The medical men's report had not been more unfavourable than former reports, but the signs appeared to her to be pointing towards the fatal result against which she had been maintaining an incessant wartare for more than a week. The fever ran so high, and his breathing was so short and laboured, that his upper lip was drawn from

his teeth in a manner which bore a ghastly resemblance to a grin. There was the unnatural chalky whiteness round the mouth, contrasting with the vivid red on the cheeks. The nostrils were sunk; indeed the whole face had fallen in a little. The hair which she had combed to refresh him was matted again the next minute. The muscular hands, which within the month had held back Dragon without an effort, were stretched out limp and fluttering, plucking and picking at the bedclothes. Suddenly he opened the eyes wont to be heavy and downcast, which, when not closed in sleep, had been unnaturally bright and roving for a number of days, and looked her straight in the face, with such intelligence in the glance that she quaked.

'Am I going to die, Lady Jones?' he asked simply.

It was not what she expected him to say; it was a trying question nevertheless. 'I hope not, my dear boy—you are a boy to me, you know'—she said, struggling to be quiet, 'but none of us can tell what may happen to you or to anyone of us. We are all in God's merciful hands; try to trust Him.'

He looked at her more keenly and steadily than he had looked throughout his illness. 'That means that I am as bad as possible, I have neither time nor breath to spare. Send for Kitty—Kitty Carew—she ought to have been here before.'

'Very well, if you wish it,' she said, taking care not to express the slightest surprise or disapproval of such a summons at such a moment.

'I do wish it, and it is the rule to let dying people have what they wish—ain't it? "Give him anything he fancies," the doctor says, when it don't signify what he takes so far as the poor wretch's life is concerned,' he went on excitedly, between breaks of gasping and coughing, 'and I fancy my Kitty's being here. Surely a man has a right to fancy his wife's being with him—at the last you know.'

'Wife, Jem!' she could not help jumping up in dismay, though a protest might be fatal to him.

'Yes,' he said; 'I had better tell you, for you are a good sort, and may stand by her when I am gone. I over-persuaded her to marry me when she was away from home for her summer holidays, more than three years since. She was a mere lass, not eighteen then. The child was born the summer before last, and we left him with her aunt, who is in the secret.'

'The child! Have you a child as well as a wife?' gasped Lady Jones, as if her breath was going as fast as his.

'Yes, I told you. Hughie is more than two years old. He was a fine little chap when I saw him five months ago,' said Jem, with something between a sob and a groan.

Another deception and fraud, another dishonourable concealment and heartless outrage against social law, in the miserable history of the family!

Was this the time to cry out against Jem's follies and sins,

when there might be only the briefest space left for such repentance and restitution as were still possible? Was she the woman who could make the outcry?

Jem had taken her, and everybody else whom the news concerned, at a complete disadvantage. He had gone far to shut their mouths effectually.

'Hughie will be the Squire of Blackhall—poor ill-fated place that it is,' he was muttering to himself. Then he addressed her in a louder tone, 'You will look after his interests: they will be your own considering the money you have lent me.'

She to look after the child—the heir—a Hugh Endicott, too!—for Jem, in his dogged conservatism, had not scrupled to give his son the child's grandfather's name, which had, indeed, been borne repeatedly in the old family.

Could Jem have a suspicion, an inspiration, as the near approach of death is said to purge men's eyes from earthly films and reveal to them spiritual issues, with facts and shapes which would otherwise have remained hidden from them? No; Jem was only thinking with what honesty, reason, and strength remained to him, of the cloudy prospects of his unacknowledged wife and child, and seeking to bespeak for them aid which had already been lavishly bestowed on himself.

Lady Jones must learn more at whatever risk. 'Does anyone here know of what you have told me? Does Tom Carew know?'

'Not a syllable,' said Jem, with feeble emphasis. 'He would not have been a party to the wrong done to his daughter in keeping her out of her right. It was a great trouble to her that he should be so deceived.'

She might have said, 'What on earth induced you to go and do it? What faintest hope could you have had that the wrong would be made right, by anything you could accomplish afterwards?' But Jem was not in a condition to answer such questions, if they were ever to be answered. Probably the reply to them lay in a nutshell—in a single line of an old song,

Fair was the maiden, and fond was the lover—

and desperately foolish, as well as fond, which is not a rare combination in a lover.

Still, the whole story, though there was a circumstantiality in it, might be a figment of Jem's fevered brain. 'Have you proofs of what you have said? You are not dreaming, are you? Sick men often dream, and accuse themselves of all kinds of misdemeanours. You are not dreaming, surely?'

'All right,' said Jem, with what sounded like a ghastly sort of philosophy. 'Kitty has the marriage lines and the certificates of the registration of the child's birth and baptism. Her aunt and cousin witnessed our marriage.'

'Then I will go and send for Kitty—Endicott—as she really

is—without losing a moment's time,' said Lady Jones firmly. 'But I must tell your sisters first. Do you consent? Do you wish me to do so?'

'I suppose you must,' he said reluctantly, with something of his old ungraciousness, throwing himself about on his pillow. 'There will be a precious row, especially on Celia's part! As if either she or Lucy had any title to interfere! As if Kitty were not as good as they are, aye, and a thousand times better, too! What have they done for themselves or anyone else since they came into the world, I should like to know? As if they were the injured persons!'

'Hush, hush, compose yourself! You are doing yourself harm. You will not be able to speak to your wife when she comes. Never mind who think themselves the injured persons. The thing is to redress the injury when it can be redressed. Perhaps your sisters have not had great opportunities of doing much either for themselves or other people. I know poor Lucy has been breaking her heart seeking to do you good. There, I have rung. I hear Sally Beaver's step; keep quiet for your own sake and Kitty's.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

WARRING RIGHTS.

One of Lady Jones's self-imposed tasks was anticipated. Before she could find Celia and Lucy, Sally Beaver, on her way to Jem, stopped her with the announcement: 'Here be zchoolmistress, Tom Carew o' the Vurze Bush's daughter, axing for you, Lady Jones, and her won't be denied or put off with the tale that you are engaged with measter. I thought zchoolmistresses teached manners, and in course were up to what they teached: and I had a notion that them cattle had to be in their zchoolhouses every lawful day—over and aboon the half o' Zaturday and a month or zix weeks in harvest time. This beant Zaturday, nor it ain't harvest time,' grumbled Sally.

'No, Sally, but she must have business with me,' said the woman in request in a stunned way, while at the same time her throbbing heart began to beat still more violently.

Kitty Carew, or Endicott, was standing, as a suppliant might have stood, in the yawning cavity of the hall of the house of which she was the rightful mistress. She was in her sensible dark Devonshire serge school frock, jacket and black hat, exquisitely neat as usual, but with the word schoolmistress and not lady written all over her. Her small dark face was twitching with strong emotion, which she yet kept down by a Herculean effort. Her craving, imploring eyes, glowing with

suppressed fire, cried without need of words, 'Is my Jem, my husband, the father of my child, alive or dead? Is there any hope left for him and me?'

Lady Jones had no thought of doing anything, save hurry to her and save her heartstrings from cracking. 'He is just the same. There is some hope still. While there is life there is hope, the doctors say. Kitty, I know it all. He has told me. You shall go to him and stay with him as he wishes—as you are entitled to do, after you are satisfied that you can control yourself, and when he is prepared to see you, at once, instead of looking for you in the course of the afternoon.'

A quiver passed over Kitty's face and a trembling over her figure, so that she was forced to lean against the wall, but she commanded herself wonderfully. When she spoke it was composedly, though very earnestly: 'I asked for you, Lady Jones, because you were not a young woman, and you looked as if you had known trouble. I meant to tell you because I could not keep it to myself any longer, and he lying dying up here; I could not stay on teaching in the school. I am glad he has told of his own accord at last.'

'Did you urge him to tell before?'

'No, I cannot say I urged him. I did not see what good it would do, especially after his sisters came to Blackhall. We could not all live together, and he was in a manner bound to keep them, as they had been brought up to look for it. I do not see how he could very well have denied the obligation though he kicked against it. I would not let him come near me—hardly ever. I wished him to give me leave to tell my father, and that I might go away with my child and work for him. I could have done it perfectly well,' said the little woman proudly, 'and have had no more to do with Jem,' her face and voice fell at the words, 'since everything was against our being able to live together.'

'But your father would not have allowed it. He would not have seen you and your child set aside and deprived of your due.'

'I am not certain,' said Kitty doubtfully. 'Nobody here knew. I should have gone away among strangers. Father would not have held the power to establish little Hugh in his rights, if it ever came to that. As it is, I have driven father wild this morning—worse than he was when mother died, if you know what that means.'

There was no answer from the white-haired, white-faced woman beside her, except that she wrung her hands and murmured: 'My poor girl! Oh, poor Kitty!'

'I did not think he would have taken it so to heart. I believe he feels Jem Endicott's share in it nearly as much as mine,' continued Kitty with the same forced unnatural calmness. 'He had a great regard for Jem, father had. and had been bemoaning his

illness. Father is an old Devonshire man with a great respect for the old county families. I believe he would have hated to bring the Endicotts down again in the eyes of the public, even for me. I think he might have let me go away and try what I could do for the child, for a time at least.'

'But that is all over now. Jem has told. You must take your place here at once.'

'Lest he should die before I can take it?' said Kitty with wide open, staring eyes, but without a tear. 'I don't know that it is worth it, except to please him and that I must have my husband to myself at the end. Lady Jones, I wish to say something to you who have been so good to him and me. I was very young when I let Jem Endicott marry me three summers ago; but I knew what I was about, and how wrong and silly it was. Young as I was, I was older than he in a sense, and I could have resisted and controlled him. I don't wish you to put the chief blame on him—not though he were walking about strong and well, instead of lying at death's door up yonder. But I should like you to know that I did not take the false step in order to be a lady, and do nothing and have all I wanted—which poor girls think is a lady's lot. I knew I should never be a lady, try as I might, and I did not care about it, either then or now.'

Lady Jones did not contradict her or say to Kitty that she was something more than a lady—she was, in spite of her error, a brave, honest woman. Lady Jones was thinking how the girl who was so strong and self-sustained must have been blinded by passion to give her consent to marry Jem. How infatuated she, too, must have been to wander so widely from the ways of truth and uprightness, and forfeit the independence and self-respect which must have been specially dear to her, to agree to live the life of double dealing, false-seeming secret humiliation which had blighted her youthful bloom and embittered her whole nature. What a hero and yet the reverse of a hero poor Jem must have been to Kitty Carew!

'Do you think that you can go to him now—that you can enter his room without startling him?' Lady Jones asked gently. 'He is almost sure to be dozing, and he may reason, if he reasons at all, that hours instead of minutes have passed since I quitted him. But remember, he is very, very ill. Tell me if you are frightened.'

'I frightened to be with Jem in any circumstances!' Kitty's voice, which was naturally rather deep than shrill, grew shrill at the notion; 'I want help to take care of him!'

'Very well, said the other quickly, 'you'll be put in possession of the post which you ought to have. I'll take you to the door and call out Sally Beaver. When you are there, nobody, not even the doctor, can bid you go, after what I have to say. You will ring if—if anything should happen.'

Kitty nodded; she could not speak. Lady Jones knew she

would have been more fluently thanked if the girl had not understood her, if her heart had not been with the man for whom she had sacrificed so much. She had said, nevertheless, that she would hardly let him come near her, that she would have been willing to take their child, and go out into the world to provide for it by her own unaided exertions, while she had nothing more to do with its father.

'How is Jem now?' asked Lucy anxiously, when Lady Jones seemed to be feeling her way into the sitting-room, one hand sliding along the panels, her feet as if they did not grasp the floor, the whole woman shaken and spent, but girded up gallantly for another encounter. 'If he is not worse, you must be quite done up, you look it. Take my chair, and let me fetch you a cushion and a footstool. Why did you not send for me? I have been sitting here waiting for a summons. You said he was better with only one person beside him when there could be no temptation to talk in whispers, which he might hear and which teased him. Has Sally gone to take your place?'

'Don't make a fuss, Lucy,' said Celia superciliously, not rising from her chair and not changing her listless attitude. 'Lady Jones will speak when she is inclined, and tell us how our brother is when it pleases her, which will be presently, I suppose; she does not seem in a great hurry to relieve our suspense.'

'Your brother is no better, so far as I can judge. Sally did supply my place for a few minutes, but she has left him now,' said Lady Jones vaguely, almost dreamily, mechanically spreading out her black dress while she spoke, and clasping her hands tightly on her knee.

'Then Jem is left alone; I must go to him!' cried Lucy, starting up in fright, and with a tone of surprised reproach in her voice.

'No, Lucy, you must not go into his room without permission from him and someone else,' said Lady Jones with an effort. 'He is not alone—Kitty Carew is with him.'

'Kitty Carew!' cried both sisters, Lucy in accents of plaintive distress, Celia in a voice of harsh indignation.

'The doctor said he was to see nobody,' remonstrated Lucy.

'A young woman in her rank of life!' fumed Celia. 'Why, it is disgusting and highly improper in her to propose to act as a nurse to a young man in his position—after what has been said, too, of his frequenting the Furze Bush, and no doubt entertaining a sneaking, coarse admiration for the barmaid. That is just in Jem's line. Men like him always go wrong with barmaids. You are an old woman, Lady Jones, but are you blind and deaf? What can you be thinking of?'

'Stop!' cried Lady Jones. 'Before you say another word which you may regret to have spoken, listen to me—she is his wife, she has been married to him for three years. They have a

child two years old over in Exmoor, where she used to go and stay in the summer.'

There was a second's dead pause of utter amazement and hot wrath, still mingled and qualified with incredulity.

'Jem married for three years, before we came home even, and we not to know of it!' cried out Lucy.

'Well, I did not expect much from Jem, but to demean himself and us by marrying that girl!' protested Celia. Then she turned straightway upon Lady Jones, according to a craving of Celia's nature that she should immediately find a victim when anything went wrong with her.

'You must have connived at this low entanglement. How did you come to know of it? Who brought this shameless person here at such a time? Why should you tell us what is our business, not yours?'

'Oh, Celia, don't make it worse by insulting Lady Jones. Oh, dear Lady Jones, don't mind her; she is always like that, she cannot keep from hurting people when she is hurt herself, and she does it even when she is not vexed, when she is only in play; she really does not mean anything. Oh, what shall we do if you leave us?'

'I won't leave you, Lucy, at least not till your brother has no further need of me and sends me away. This is his house which I have saved for him, and no one but himself, or it may be the wife he has chosen, can turn me out,' said Lady Jones, with a light in her eyes which even Celia appreciated and did not quite know how to extinguish. 'As to the charge you have made against me, Celia Endicott'—the accused turned on her accuser—'of having been privy to Jem's marriage to a shameless girl, she is not shameless. Apart from her error in degrading herself by marrying him privately, she has been as well-conducted as she is clever and well-educated, though she may be his inferior in rank. As to my share in the marriage, I beg to remind you that I was not in Devonshire three years ago; I only came to Oxcleeve last spring.'

'It does not signify,' said Celia haughtily. 'I shall never speak to that insolent, common girl. I shall never own her as my sister-in-law, I shall tell Jem.'

'Take care what you say before it is too late,' Lady Jones again arrested her, lifting up her hand in solemn warning. 'Remember it is only too possible that your brother may not see another day. I thought this morning that he would be dead before night. He recognised the danger, bade me send for Kitty Carew, and told me she was his wife. Do not, I beseech you, as you would die in peace yourself, shake the dregs of his troubled life and disturb his last hours by strife.'

'And why should you beseech me? why should he tell you his vile secrets?' raged Celia in mad jealousy. 'Are you his conscience-keeper? and if so, why should you deny it a minute

ago? What authority had you to send for Kitty Carew or Kitty anybody?'

'I did not send; she came herself. I would have spoken to you and Lucy first,' said Lady Jones wearily.

Celia was not to be mollified.

'This is our house—mine and Lucy's and Jem's, our father's house—that you should bid guests to it!'

'Celia, you forget,' implored Lucy. 'Think what Lady Jones has done for Jem, how she freed this place from the bailiffs—why, the house was not ours, it was theirs, till she bought them and their employers off—and how she has been nursing Jem day and night. I am sure we are all deeply indebted to her.

'Speak for yourself, Lucy,' said one of the indebted women thanklessly. 'I think if I conferred a favour I should be a little more chary in extorting its value to the last farthing. I should not flaunt it in my unfortunate debtor's face; and I don't see how Jem's possible dying lessens the disgrace he has brought upon himself and us. We shall survive to bear the consequences in the shape of a totally unpresentable widow, who does not mean to mount the funeral pyre—Hindoo fashion, I suppose. You need not shriek, Lucy; Jem will not die the sooner for my speaking of it—indeed, you have all been talking of it a great deal more than was necessary; you may permit me the privilege once upon a time—and if he die, there can be no question but that he must be buried. I for one am not going to say I forgive him and promise to acknowledge the school creature he has married. School, forsooth! She has been a fit person to teach girls proper behaviour, contentment with their stations, respect for their superiors, and so forth! The Rev. Miles has been grossly put upon, unless she is an old flame of his turned over on the poor spirited booby, Jem.' With this last wicked insinuation Celia flounced out of the room.

'Oh, dear,' Lucy lamented aloud, sitting down and rocking herself in the old approved fashion, 'I thought it was bad enough without Jem's being a married man and his wife the daughter, not even of a hotel-keeper, like Clara Bartlett at Miss Pinfold's, but of the man who has the Furze Inn, little better than an ale-house, in the village! We shall not need to visit him, shall we, if we are ever all reconciled? Celia would never, never, consent to that. But I don't care so much about visiting him, if the other resource is to let Jem die in enmity with me. Oh, Lady Jones, say he will not die, and I shall go at once and kiss him and shake hands with Kitty—with his wife! I shall not need to kiss her for a little while yet, don't you think, perhaps not till Christmas or Easter? But will there, maybe, be no Jem then to see me do it? I'll rather run and kiss her this minute whatever Celia may say.'

'No, dear, you'll have to sit and wait,' said Lady Jones

sadly. 'We can do nothing else now we have given him up to his wife. Let us trust she will be a better and more successful nurse than either you or I have been.'

'A better nurse than you?' exclaimed Lucy. 'That is not possible. The doctor said you did wonders, took his temperature, felt his pulse, and changed the medicines as well as he could.'

'For all that, his wife may do more for him, little Lucy, and it is certainly her province to do it. He belongs to her before any other person.'

'I don't like to hear you say so,' said Lucy discontentedly, 'and why do you call me "little Lucy"? I am not nearly so tall as you are, certainly, but I am taller than Celia, and I could almost make two of this Kitty.'

'Be satisfied, then, with your advantages,' said Lady Jones, with a faint, fugitive smile, 'while I continue to hold my own. You are little Lucy to me; I suppose it is a bad trick I have caught to call you so. And I say, Lucy, if you feel it hard to be turned out of poor Jem's room--that another woman, whom we have never thought of in this light, should reign supreme there, whom he has called to reign, remember, in whom he has more faith, whom he prefers to you and me—think it is hard on me too. Yes, it is hard on me,' said Lady Jones, with rising agitation, 'for I thought I might make him well again, just as I had been able to redeem Blackhall from the bailiffs. I hoped to give him peace and see him happy, if it were but for a day—he who has had so little peace and happiness since he was a boy. But if it is done for him in another way, it comes to the same thing in the end, and I have no cause to complain,' declared a magnanimous woman.

It was Tom Carew to whom Lady Jones had to answer next. Tom followed his daughter to Blackhall, exasperating Sally Beaver in a still higher degree as to 'what frenzy had took them Carews.' This did not mean that Sally was not *au fait* to vague Oxcleeve gossip. She guessed roughly, and in a measure, 'some sweethearting or other,' which she had hitherto stoutly denied, as the origin of the frenzy. Her dim suspicion did not prevent her from expressing herself amazed and scandalised at the appearance of the innkeeper at Blackhall on the heels of the schoolmistress. There had been no use in saying to him that her master was not to be spoken with, for then he said he would have speech of one of the ladies. She was sure Miss Celia would have naught to do with him, and Miss Lucy weren't of much good left to herself, so Sally bethought herself of Lady Jones, who had come to the years of discretion, had all her wits about her, did not go into tantrums, and might as well hearken to the man as she had hearkened to his maid. She had not only hearkened to little 'schoolmistress,' she had let her in to bid farewell to the squire, which though the pair

might have been main foolish—and her a schoolmistress!—Sally, as she was a woman with a human heart, could not help regarding as a moving incident in the drama.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PEACEMAKERS AND PEACEBREAKERS.

Tom Carew had received a blow that morning which had served to stagger and floor him much more than to lift him up in his own estimation, whatever it might do in other people's. His little girl, whom he had counted as good as gold, to have been keeping a secret from him, and such a secret, for the matter of three years! Mr. Jem, the young squire, of whose patronage, in spite of its profitlessness, Tom had been proud, whom he had taken pleasure in serving and regarding as one of the old gentry in the Endicotts' adversity, just as he would have done in their prosperity, to have made him such a poor return! Still, Tom was a father, and he was an honest man. He must protect his child, however she might have served him, and he must put an end to this dishonourable secrecy. So, though his heart was sore and heavy, and his face red to the large ears with anger and affront, he advanced, in his better-class groom's dress, courageously and steadfastly to the charge.

Lady Jones did for him what she had done for his daughter, she spared him what she saw would be the awkwardness and pain of telling his story. 'I know everything,' she said gravely, not unkindly. 'Kitty is with her husband. I shall see that nobody interferes with her, or disputes her claim. He is very ill, and ought to see nobody except her, whom he asked for before she came. I am afraid it might be his death to see you, though you have a right to insist upon it. Would you care to stay and wait?' she asked hesitatingly.

'No, no,' he said huskily, drawing his rough hand across his mouth working with emotion. 'I bean't come for that, or to say how bitter disappointed I've been in my own flesh and blood—that is my business—or in him that is between her and me. I wanted to tell you that I'll never be in her way, or his'n, or the bearn's, if so be he ever stands in his father's shoon. To think that my bearn should have a walking bearn, and me never to know of his existence! But that is neither here nor there. I'll never come near the place to disturb or mortify her or him, or the misses and you and their other fine friends, no more than if her had never belonged to me, though I know it will wring my Kitty's heart spite of what she's done. The bit o' money I had saved for her shall be put in the bank

in her name the next market day. It's not much, not such a loan as a rich lady like you has trusted the squire wi', but it's hers and his'n out and out from that day, and it may help to fill up. Everything else I can lay by will be theirs and their bearns' when I'm gone.'

To Tom's surprise his neighbour and employer at the Court, whom he had held in high esteem, both because she was a rich woman and never grudged his charges, and because if she worked those ponies of hers a bit on the moorland tracks, she never made the unreasonable demands which some ladies made either on horseflesh or man's flesh, suddenly put her hands to her face and sobbed behind them.

'Don't take on so,' remonstrated poor Tom. 'I know it's a downcome to the Endicotts and to you who are their friend, and have thought to help them. But the Carews bean't just out of the gutter, neither, not in Kitty's time leastways. At the poorest they were a decent lot, which is more than can be said of the Endicotts. Kitty was not but the bonniest, her was the best thought-on girl in Oxcleeve by parson and all, what with wisdom and steadiness and book-learning, since her head was no higher than the table. But it seems no good comes of an old head on young shoulders,' he stopped his boasting with a sigh. 'It ain't natural, that's what it ain't. Only I would have you consider her might have been an honour to the place, and the pride of my heart all her days, if Mr. Jem Endicott had not crossed her path. His friends should take that into account, now that what's done is done, and can no more be recalled than a drowned wether or a pony that has broke his neck.'

'I am not disparaging her,' said Lady Jones, recovering her composure. 'It was not that I was thinking of. But, oh! how could your daughter wrong you so? She will never get over it.'

'Nay, now,' said Tom, not willing that anybody save himself should blame his lass, whom he had thought as good as gold, but who had failed him. 'Her were but a bearn three year gone, and he were a gentleman born, and meant her fair, thank God, and spoke her over; we mun make allowance for the lass.'

'Let her thank God for a good father,' said Lady Jones, still speaking with strong feeling, 'far better than she deserves. Let her thank God for her father's mercy more than for the love of any Jem Endicott of them all.'

It might be that the removal of the weight which had so long pressed on Jem Endicott's mind at a time when nobody could very well challenge his conduct, helped his sick body. Perhaps Kitty with her fine capacity and her indomitable energy no less than her wife's love could really fight his disease as nobody else could. Possibly the doctor had been right in declining altogether to despair when Lady Jones lost hope.

Anyhow it is certain Jem showed symptoms of amendment long before Oxcleeve had done ringing with the last scandal about the Endicotts, that Kitty Carew of the Furze Bush, the schoolmistress, was Jem Endicott's lawful wife, had been so for years, was the mother of his child, was acknowledged by him, and had taken up her abode at Blackhall.

There were many people greatly exercised, among them Kitty's elder pupils, with regard to whom she must feel with strong compunction and regret—for she was naturally a conscientious little woman to the end of her career—that she had been a stumbling-block and a temptation instead of the shining example they took her for. These well-grown, rosy-faced Devonshire lasses, still in pinafores and sun-bonnets like their little sisters, were fain, with pardonable infatuation, to regard the mistress who knew everything and had been so strict with them, as the cleverest and luckiest of women.

Mrs. Reynolds walked about from morning till night and waylaid Lady Jones every time she went to the Court, to represent to her that surely her eyes were opened now to the character of the Endicotts. To think that she had so compromised herself and her friends by going and living at Blackhall in order to help to nurse her landlord in his illness!

'Mrs. Reynolds,' said Lady Jones firmly, 'I told you what you had to expect from me, that I was not like other women. I have never visited except at Blackhall. I declined to go to your house; I refused to avail myself of the introductions you put in my power, so anxious was I to keep you and everybody else from being compromised by a waif like me. I could not cause my door to be shut in your face. I could not—no, I could not deny myself a shake of your brother-in-law's hand.'

'I know you told me you were odd,' admitted Mrs. Reynolds reluctantly, 'but that is like a man saying he is poor, proof positive that he is rich; and if shaking Greg Barnes's hand were all, he does not make it so scarce, unfortunately, that you need reflect upon yourself for that indulgence.' And then Mrs. Reynolds went off again on her friend's lack of comprehension. 'But there is one comfort,' the censor allowed, 'that your landlord has been a married man all the time, if it had not been such a marriage, made known at such a time, shocking! How could you bear to come in contact with the designing minx in whom our dear good vicar has been so deceived? I cannot say I was taken in. I always thought it very ill-judged, to say the least, to take a young person, however well-qualified and steady she might appear to serve her own purpose, from a village inn, little better than an ale-house, into a Church of England school. But the best of clergymen have their simple side—for that matter men in general are not to be trusted where dust can be thrown into their eyes by women, especially by young girls. I can remember my late dear husband's insisting on getting an order for the

infirmary at Ashford and giving it to one of the pertest, flirtiest little fools in the place. If you will believe me, no argument of mine would put him past the blunder. "My dear Adeline," he said, "it is not the girl's morals I am looking after—I leave that to you"—I need not say he trusted me implicitly—"it is her liver which is seriously out of order, and cannot be properly attended to in her father's crowded cottage." As if she would have known that she had a liver, had she minded her work as she ought to have done.'

Greg Barnes had a different version of Jem's marriage when he drove over from Barnes Clyffe to Blackhall on this occasion. He was able to get out of his carriage and walk the length of the hall, to which Sally Beaver brought him the strongest of her arm-chairs. There he sat like a grand old chief, and laid down the law to Lady Jones and Lucy, for Celia refused to come down and see him, and Kitty, whom the visitor pointedly asked for as 'Mrs. Endicott,' could not yet leave her husband to receive any guest, however honourable.

'So Jem is better, glad to hear it, and has taken home his wife; he should have done that in the beginning, but better late than never. She is an honest woman, though she acted a trifle indiscreetly, and Tom Carew is as honest a young fellow as is to be found in these parts. Of course he is young to me; can remember his father, who was my contemporary. Tell Mrs. Endicott Mrs. Barnes will do herself the pleasure of calling on her as soon as she is ready to receive visitors. We have known her all our life, but we wish to be the first to welcome her into our set, which she has done nothing to disgrace. Bless you! I wish you knew what we had to swallow in the old days, though better not, especially with young things like Milly and Nettie and you, Miss Lucy, growing up around us. Everybody knows that little pitchers have long ears. But I'll say this, we always swallowed all there was to swallow manfully, ay, and womanfully, the moment we saw the sinners meant to turn over a new leaf and do better. The only thing I couldn't swallow was profane hypocrisy, and so I have never entered a church door from then, when there were no chapels in these parts, till now. Things have altered, I own, the Lord be praised for it, and the young vicar is a trump, but I've got out of the habit of going to church, and I'm too old to learn. As to any difficulty in swallowing a modest, sharp little thing like Kitty Carew—Mrs. Endicott, I beg her pardon—if you think that you do not know the world or the old days. A long step beneath him in rank? what does that signify when she has honestly climbed it after all. It was he who was most to blame for keeping us in the dark so long; but he let in the light at last. Ah! there is nothing like a glimpse of the other world for causing us to make up our minds to keep no more hidden overgrown corners in this. The schoolmistress? Much to her credit; she'll put us all on

our p's and q's with regard to our spelling and grammar, and set us right when we go wrong. My respectful compliments and cordial congratulations to Mrs. Endicott and my young friend Jem. She is in safe hands when she is in yours, Lady Jones. We owe you another debt of gratitude, if you've had any hand in making things clear and above board here. We're obliged to you, too, Miss Lucy, for showing us an example of a sister good to a brother at a pinch, which I tell you you'll never regret, and I'm old enough to be your grandfather, and have had the sorrow to see sisters who forsook their brothers in trouble, and were forsaken themselves in their evil day.'

The two persons out of the family, the most affected by Kitty Carew's promotion, were George Fielding and Miles North. It was not that George could not conceive the possibility of a private marriage and a small Endicott of another generation in the background; such marvels, though they are commoner in fiction than in real life, had crossed his legal path before now. All that he could say was that he would not, if his suspicions had been roused, have freed Jem from a capability for such a piece of insanity, but he could never have associated it with clear-headed, dutiful, punctilious Kitty, Tom's trusted daughter, the foremost scholar of her rank in the parish, the vicar's prize pupil and prize schoolmistress. George rather thought he was sorry for Kitty, though the draught had been of her own brewing, and he had some faith in her dragging Jem Endicott at her chariot wheels, and inspiriting him in the line of a more hopeful and successful career than he could have otherwise attained to. Perhaps this was little Kitty's mission in life after all, George owned, after he had screwed up his mouth for a long whistle, and shrugged his shoulders as high as his ears at the first receipt of the tidings. If Lady Jones did not find fault, nobody else was entitled to complain, not even the cynic Celia and that strange morbid girl Lucy. If Lady Jones did not find fault! Ah! there was the rub. It was in connection with Lady Jones that George Fielding was so much struck by the discovery of Jem Endicott's marriage. In George's excited state of mind on the subject, the unexpected revelation seemed the next thing to an interposition of Providence to turn away attention, both public and private, from the earlier mystery, and to help her, for good or for ill, still to preserve her incognito. Where was there room, either in Blackhall or out of it, for speculating on the extraordinary friendship which the widow of the late Sir Benjamin Jones had struck up with the Endicotts, leading her to devote not merely her money but her time and herself to the by no means popular or highly esteemed family, when everybody was gabbling about Kitty and Jem? How they could have managed to get married in a church, and that at a place not so very far off, though it was in the wilds of Exmoor, so long ago, and not been found out? When was she to make her first

appearance in the village as Madame Endicott? Lawk-a-daisy! an ill-omened name as ever was, and what was to become of the two boarding-school misses? The very geese seemed to take up the tale and go about cackling it with all their might.

Miles North had looked as impassive as a stone when he was apprised of the defalcation of his teacher, but for the time he went no more to Blackhall. He did not congratulate Mrs. Endicott on her promotion, he did not condole with Lucy on her coming deposition as housekeeper. The truth was, he was exceedingly offended and mortified. Not only was he displeased by everything irregular and out of order, such as a *mésalliance*, or, worse still, a secret marriage; he felt Kitty's transgression like a mockery of his authority, an insult to his judgment, and a scandal on his school. He hated to be found wrong, and in this case it was caused by the betrayal of the confidence he had reposed in another person. He had been proud of his young schoolmistress, whom he had in a manner reared and trained. He had put the utmost faith in her, and it did more than make him angry, it wounded him keenly, to find that from an early date she had deceived him. She had done much that he must condemn, and she had done it under the most aggravating circumstances, in concealment, under false pretences which rendered her life a lie. She had also suffered him, in order that she might the better hoodwink him and the public, to maintain her in a position for which, as it was now proved, she had been morally unfit. The simple fact of her presence in the school was an injury from the effects of which it would long suffer. It really seemed as if the Rev. Miles, not having learnt long-suffering in the character of a father, like Tom Carew, but being a man in office instead, would never, in spite of his good christianity, be able fully to forgive his former protégée and fellow-worker.

It added an additional sting to Kitty's offence in her clergyman's eyes that it should have been committed in connection with Jem Endicott of Blackhall. It showed the vicar once more in vivid colours how little could be expected from an Endicott, how untrustworthy the whole race had been, and how tainted root and branch. It was impossible to contemplate the bare possibility of calling Jem Endicott and his wife brother and sister-in-law, and of being brought into the close contact with them which the relationship implied. More than the clergyman's pride, his fastidiously honourable nature, his rigid moral standard, revolted at the idea. It was no comfort to feel conscious that he had been trifling with temptation lately, to be called upon to pull himself up and to frame fresh resolves against yielding to his weakness in future. The last straw was contributed to the young man's burden of discomfiture by his cousin Tony's casting it in his teeth and evidently gloating over it.

The two men were still at the dinner table, having just concluded a formal and far from genial meal, and Miles was medi-

tating a speedy retreat to his study without more marked discourtesy to his cousin and guest than the host was usually guilty of. The necessity of practising occasional incivility in order to keep Tony in his proper place, was in itself torture to a radically well-bred man such as Miles North was, the foundation of whose good breeding lay in his deep sense of justice and generosity.

Tony began while he gingerly peeled a walnut, 'Queer lot, these Endicotts. Who would have thought the boor Jem would have been sweet on your prim little beauty of a schoolmistress, and what is more, sold himself for her?'

'The least is the best that can be said for him and her,' said Miles shortly; 'but it is none of your business or mine, Tony.'

'I am not so sure about that, as far as I am concerned,' said Tony maliciously. 'In spite of your benevolent warning I have got a trifle mixed up with these Endicotts, to my cost. I was five pounds the poorer for them the other day.'

'I did not know that you had five pounds to spare,' said the vicar dryly, staring a little at the same time, as Tony expected.

Tony made a grimace. 'A fool and his money are soon parted; but what can the most poverty-stricken wretch do when a little thing comes to him bathed in tears, and confides to him her little bills and her bear of a brother's niggardliness? I do not think that even your reverence could have stood the test, especially when it was demure Miss Lucy, so chary of her favours when she has not an object to gain—trust her! she knows what she is about, she is a sly little puss—who was the petitioner.'

'Tony North,' said his cousin in a voice of scarcely suppressed thunder, 'I have harboured you for years now, but I shall not suffer abominable slander to be spoken at my table. A man who can be capable of repeating such a transaction when true is quite as capable of inventing it when false, which I believe it is, from the bottom of my soul. For what rascally purpose you have told the story you can best tell.'

Tony North's sallow colour grew a brick-red, and he half started from the table; but he controlled himself and sat down again.

'I am aware I am a poor relation and a hanger on,' he said with a vicious snarl. 'I suppose I must stomach the lie direct along with a few more cousinly kindnesses of a similar description. The tables are turned, Mr. Miles, since my father helped your father to pay his debts and to send you—a horrid little prig you were then—to Rugby and Oxford.'

'Your father was a generous, honest gentleman, and so was mine. I have done my best to repay them both,' said Miles, looking the speaker full in the face.

'And I have employed the talents which a kind Providence

has given me to disgrace the simple-minded pater, so much the worse for me,' said Tony, resuming his tone of insolent banter. 'But we were not speaking of our respected parents to begin with; we were dealing with a more interesting topic, and that with our customary unanimity and harmony. I say, Miles, if you don't believe me you can ask the girl herself—that is a fair enough proposal, made in good faith, I assure you—if I did not stump out for her frocks and falderals, when the persons who stand for shopkeepers and *modistes* in this benighted region were pressing her for the tin. She will tell you, if there is gratitude in woman. I was very good to her, poor extravagant innocent! upon my honour, and have not troubled her about the payment. We have been the best of friends ever since. Didn't you see her at the Pony Drift? She was ready to give up the family patroness, Lady Jones, and obey the slightest wag of my finger when I did her the good turn of keeping her away from that white-faced lame crow of a widow.'

'I cannot give you credit for either the motives or the actions you attribute to yourself,' said Miles icily, 'but in the matter of which you are pleased to boast you were so far consistent; it seems you tried to come between the young lady and the best friend the Endicotts have.'

'Oh! but my Lady Jones has come out since then,' said Tony unblushingly. 'She has paid the clodhopper's pressing debts—by Jove! I wish she would pay mine. If I had the faintest anticipation of such a delightful result I too would pay her every attention. I might even rival my clerical cousin in the number of my calls and the height at which I stood in her good graces. I could put up with a little croaking. I could even let her poke about me when I was ill, if such were her remarkable taste, like my friend—or enemy, Jem Endicott.'

'I suspect your advances would be thrown away,' said Miles with undisguised scorn, getting up and walking to a window, and yet he lingered.

'Well, I need not waste them when they are so acceptable in another quarter,' said Tony with well-affected briskness. 'I say, what will you wager that Lady Jones's pet, good little Lucy, will not consent to meet me on the moor, at any place or hour I like to appoint?'

'Wager on the chances of a woman's folly and ruin?' cried Miles, unable longer to contain himself. 'What do you take me for? Do you think that I am such a one as yourself?' He drew out his not over well-filled purse, took from it the only five-pound note it held, and flung it down on the table. 'There is the amount of your loan—if there ever was such a loan; remember I don't believe it. I am convinced, if there is anything in it, you *have twisted* and misrepresented the truth till it is the worst *kind of falsehood*. You know I am far from a rich man, but I'll *make that* five pounds fifty—a hundred, if you will let Lucy

Endicott alone. Cease to molest her because of any small help which she may have been so weak and unfortunate as to accept at your hands, and the money is yours.'

Tony reddened again—an angry flush, not a blush of shame, unknown to his brazen face. At the same time a greedy light came into his cunning eyes, and he wavered for an instant; but rage, vindictive spite, and the desire to retain the means of galling his cousin almost beyond endurance, carried the day. He tossed back the note and rose, putting his hands into his pockets as a preliminary step to strolling away. 'I am not come to the pitch of accepting bribes. Is the suggestion one of your modes of repaying my father's memory for his liberal deeds to you and yours in your need? Besides, though you might prefer to have the strong-minded beauty we have been differing about, your debtor, not mine, I don't agree with you; and I have no question that neither would she if she knew your obliging proposal to buy me off. I have a notion, and I dare say she has the same, that she will fare a good deal better with a soft-hearted scapegrace like me, than with an iron-tempered, immaculate saint like you.'

'Take care; there are limits to a man's forbearance. I am bound to protect her and every woman in my parish from treachery and ill-usage, and what is more, I shall,' said Miles through his set teeth. 'It is my duty, and I'll do it. I shall tell her brother every word you have chosen to force upon me, and if there is a particle of truth in your statement you'll answer to him for it.'

'You'll do what you like I have known you of old,' said Tony, not much moved by the threat, and replying to it with a sneer. 'But I may count on a few days or weeks of grace before I'm kicked out of the parish? You will choose a fitting time for this honourable, agreeable exposure (he speaks of treachery!) of the little business transaction—shall we call it?—and of Miss Lucy Endicott's infirmities in running up personal debts, and my peccadiloes in conniving at hers? Jem Endicott was believed to be on his death-bed the other day, and though he has turned the tables on a large circle of admiring friends, and married, or what is the same thing, confessed his low marriage instead of dying, I imagine you will not risk rendering his artless wife a widow and his blessed baby fatherless, by proceeding at once to extremities. By-the-by, she was another of your pretty protégées. What a Turk you are, Miles, my boy!'

Miles North was gone to digest the bitter morsel he had been compelled to swallow, and the unkindest cut of all was that he was aware of a certain confirmation of the story in Lucy's self-accusations under the pressure of an accusing conscience and her fears for her brother's life. He was tenfold more miserable than he had been an hour before.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TWO SUNS IN THE SKY.

The species of amnesty in the household established by the circumstance that Jem was lying hovering between life and death, and that Kitty, his wife, was in nobody's way while she was where nobody could dispute her right to be, watching by her husband's bed, necessarily came to an end with the first clear indications of Jem's recovery.

There was something like a council of war held by Celia and Lucy, at which Lady Jones ventured to be present on Lucy's eager invitation, but barely tolerated by Celia. 'Well, as you have come to know all about us, there is no great objection to your being here,' said Celia ungraciously.

'Shall we ask Kitty to come down and hear what we have to say?' asked Lucy timidly. 'She can leave Jem for half an hour now, and as we cannot deny she is his wife, she has some right to be consulted,' the speaker ended falteringly.

'What are you thinking of?' cried Celia scornfully; 'though Jem has made a low marriage, as might have been expected, that is not our fault. We are not bound to take the village innkeeper's daughter to our bosoms.'

'Perhaps not,' said Lady Jones; 'but if you will allow me to say so, I am sure Lucy's instinct is the right and kind one. I think that you ought to reflect Jem might have done a great deal worse. Nobody questions the really vital point that Kitty is a good girl. In addition, she is not ignorant or stupid, or really coarse and vulgar-minded, as many a much better born and richer girl often shows herself. I have only given my opinion in passing,' went on Lady Jones, in hasty deprecation of Celia's lowering brow, 'because I wished to speak first in order to lay a proposal before you in anticipation of your making up your minds as to your future course. Permit me to tell you that my house is always at your disposal. Come to me when you will, and stay as long as you like—you cannot stay too long for me, even if it were for a permanency. I am a lonely woman, and should be thankful for your company. I would promise beforehand,' she continued with wistful earnestness, 'not to interfere with your liberty of speech or action in any way. As I have plenty of means to do what I like with, I could even engage to make such provision for you, in the probability of your surviving me, as your brother and other friends might think requisite.'

Lady Jones was so sincere in her uncalculating, unworldly

proposal, and had it so much at heart that she became positively agitated, pushing back her widow's cap from her white hair, and crushing together the folds of her black dress while she spoke.

'Oh, how good, how kind!' cried Lucy, in the fulness of her gratitude. 'Celia, did you ever hear anything like it? Aren't we happy girls? I was calling myself and you, two poor orphan girls, and could have cried over our melancholy fate a minute ago. But to stay on at the Court with Lady Jones, and drive about with her when spring comes, and arrange flowers for her, oh! and perhaps work beautiful curtains and table-covers as well as cushions and footstools for her, will be a thousand times better than living on here at Blackhall, even if poor Jem had not married Kitty Carew.'

'No, I never heard anything like it, Lucy,' said Celia, answering the question put to her, squaring her broad shoulders and lifting up her head defiantly. 'I don't know what I have done that Lady Jones should suppose I would consent either to take, or to suffer you to take, a situation as companion. Even if I were so far left to myself, it is not likely that I should incur the degradation in this hole of a village, where, among other disadvantages, there is the crowning one that it is our native place, close to our father's property, which Jem has stolen from me in order to gratify his gutter tastes by putting a gutter mistress over his house.'

'Oh, Celia, Celia, how can you be so disagreeable?' cried Lucy, her exultation converted into dismay in the twinkling of an eye. 'I did not think you cared so much for Blackhall when you were always railing at it, and at the destiny which forced us to live here.'

'And how can you say Jem stole his father's house from you?' protested Lady Jones indignantly. 'It has been open to you; and it was his by right, entailed upon him before he was born—a sorry enough inheritance, poor fellow!'

'Which you have redeemed,' said Celia insolently, 'but you do not need to remind us of that as the *raison d'être* why you are with us.' Celia had somehow found that she could insult Lady Jones with impunity. The late Sir Benjamin's widow felt, for an inscrutable reason, bound to bear it without testifying her resentment and breaking with the Endicotts. It was an unfortunate discovery for all concerned. It put Lady Jones on the footing held by Celia's family in the young woman's eyes, and was likely to render her the scourge to the stranger which she was to her own people.

'But what do you mean us to do?' asked Lucy dispiritedly.

'Stay here, of course,' answered Celia indifferently, while she calmly and deliberately drew her work-basket towards her, settled herself in the most comfortable chair—the one which commanded the most of the waning daylight and excluded the

greatest share from her neighbours, and commenced to sew at some embroidery for her own garments, with an entirely selfish absorption which had yet an exasperating air of superior wisdom and virtue. 'It was horrid before, I grant you,' observed Celia, with an accent of impartiality, 'and it will be more horrid still, but one must take the goods which the gods send us. Where is the use of whimpering or howling like Lucy?'

'What, stay with Jem now that he has got a wife—to be sure he had got her before we came, but we did not know that—Kitty, whom you despise?' cried Lucy, incoherently.

'Do you mean to say that you can make up your mind to live in your brother's house, after he has contracted a marriage which is altogether repugnant to you?' expostulated Lady Jones.

'Yes,' drawled Celia. 'He has married a wife to be his housekeeper, and bear and bring up children for him. Well, he can do that so far as I am concerned. It is Lucy who was the housekeeper, and must give up the keys. As for children I do not pretend to be fond of them, nasty little things! but if they are kept out of my way, as I trust their mother will have the sense to keep the single specimen which exists at present, I dare say I can tolerate the nuisance. It is wonderful what one can bring one's self to bear when there is no other resource.'

'But there are other resources, and is not this a great deal worse than being a companion, as you would have it that I intended you to be?' said Lady Jones, like a woman who has a right to be heard, and who, though she does not choose to retaliate, on the other hand, has no fear of retaliation. 'I assure you, Celia Endicott, I had not the slightest thought of you as my companion.'

'Better not,' said Celia grimly. 'As for two companions, a man has enough to do with one wife, they say, and I should think a woman—an idiot who requires a companion—had better confine herself to a solitary investment.'

'But Jem may not ask us to continue living here,' said Lucy, 'and even if he does, Kitty may object. The mistress of a house has a voice as to its guests. She may refuse to have the other members of her husband's family dwelling under the same roof with her and her child. I should not think that she would wish to have you here,' argued Lucy, gathering courage from Lady Jones's presence and support, 'especially if you speak as you did a moment ago of the baby—Jem's baby. Isn't it marvellous? Celia, I don't care what you say,' Lucy broke all bounds, her pink cheeks growing redder and redder, her yellow hair falling loose in her excitement, 'I am dying to see Jem's dear little baby—just to give it one hug and kiss because God has been so good as to spare its father. Shouldn't you like to see the baby, Lady Jones, after all your nursing to save Jem for his little child?'

Celia turned up her nose in ineffable disgust. 'I wish you would not gush and talk sickening bosh, Lucy. Have I not said that I'll tolerate the child, though I have no doubt it will be offensive enough, brought up as it has been by its mother's relations. If they had not been bad as well as low people, they would not have helped to decoy Jem into a shockingly unsuitable marriage, or kept his disgraceful secret for this length of time. Depend upon it, the child will have a dirty face and a shock head of hair, it will be odiously dressed, and will shout and yell whether it is gratified or contradicted. It is trying to have you slide so easily into calling the woman Kitty—even if we have to call her Mrs. Endicott; I wish her joy of the name,' remarked Celia with meaning emphasis, which struck one person present as bearing a considerable resemblance to flinging stones at the tomb of a dead mother and dancing on her grave.

'I shall not wait for an invitation,' Celia resumed the thread of her discourse, 'to remain in my father's house, of which I do not regard your Kitty as the mistress, though Jem has been so insane as to make her his housekeeper. She can keep to her own department and her own quarters. Fortunately, this house is what agents would call "commodious." There are a good many rooms in it—such as they are. They would certainly be the better for being repaired and refurnished, as they are for the most part airily destitute of the commonest necessaries in the shape of furniture; but I make no question that Lady Jones—who it appears directs and does everything here—will soon rectify that defect,' she ended, with a mocking bow to Lady Jones, who was painfully speculating whether Celia could be in her right mind.

Lady Jones had not compared notes with George Fielding, but she had arrived at the same conclusion, that Kitty, who had so long reigned supreme in her schoolroom and in the Furze Bush, who had been willing to forfeit her claims as a wife, but only that she might carry off her child and be everything to it, would not, now that she was installed at Blackhall, prove a mistress of straw for Celia to set aside or ride over rough-shod. Kitty was no soft weak girl like Lucy, she was not even the ignorant, undisciplined country lass Jem might have thrown himself away upon.

The tug of war came the very first time Jem was able to contemplate facing the family at dinner. While he was set aside and his wife kept him company, Celia, with the peculiar adroitness which always distinguished her where her own interests were concerned, had fallen into the habit of taking the head of the table, which Lucy, in the character of housekeeper, had formerly occupied, while Celia waved Lucy to the master's place at the foot, because the most trouble in carving and dispensing the food was to be encountered there. When Kitty came into the sitting-room to announce Jem's arrival and make

arrangements for his comfort, which she did with the decision and composure of a wife of twenty years' standing, Celia was already seated in the place of honour, and kept it, to the distress of Lucy, who had sprung up willingly and taken another chair, which she quitted in the next moment to help to fix the screen which was to shelter the head of the house from risky draughts. Kitty stood still for a second, then she said in the same clear tone of firm rebuke which she would have addressed to a refractory child, 'That seat belongs to the mistress of the house.'

'I am aware of the fact,' said Celia serenely, 'and as I am Jem's eldest surviving sister, the eldest female representative of the family, I naturally propose to occupy it.'

'And I as naturally request you to give it up to your brother's wife, who is his nearest relative,' Kitty made the rejoinder without a second's hesitation.

'And what if I don't,' demanded Celia, 'since I have more right to be here than you have?'

'That is untrue, and you know it. It is the very opposite of the truth. You and your sister have usurped my place from the time of your coming back to Blackhall. But I do not blame you for that, since I did not claim it, neither did your brother claim it for me. Now he has asserted my right, and I have taken it. Celia Endicott, if you do not vacate that chair I shall order Sally Beaver, who is Jem's servant and will obey me, to serve dinner in one of the empty rooms and you may continue to sit at the head of this table and eat your dinner by yourself here, or with Lucy if she chooses to bear you company. I will say no more, except that Jem has just been brought back from death's door; he is still far from well,' here Kitty's voice faltered for the first time: 'he is put about already; if you disturb and agitate him further, and I am afraid I cannot keep from him the cause for the change of rooms, you may undo all which has been done, and work mischief for which there is no remedy.'

'Don't, Celia,' besought Lucy. 'I am sure it does not matter in the least where one sits. I would go below the table if it would be of the least use. And I don't believe Kitty here would mind—would you, Kitty?—if it were not for Jem's minding, and Sally Beaver's seeing, and the talk and everything.'

'Will you hold your tongue, Lucy, if you can do nothing else,' cried Celia furiously, as she rose and quitted the room just in time to avoid an encounter with Jem, who came slowly in, wrapped in an overcoat, and using a stick.

He looked fearfully shrunk and wan, and curiously like Lady Jones, if there had been anybody disengaged enough to remark the resemblance. He had worked himself up to encountering the ordeal of returning to the family party with the addition of Kitty, and of seeing that the addition was accepted.

Kitty took her place opposite him, filling it stiffly rather than

gracefully, but with a stern sedateness about the little erect figure and the small sharply-cut face which forbade all interference with their owner's prerogatives. Figure and face said as plainly as they could do that Kitty would hold her own. She would die before she trespassed on her neighbour's ground, but having taken up her position she would never relinquish it. She might not know much of table etiquette, rather less than of parts of speech and the rule of three, but she could set herself to learn it as soon as most people could, and, till learned, she would do without it intrepidly.

Poor Jem, lumbering and slouching more than ever, heaved a sigh of relief. He felt as he had known instinctively all the time, that he had found a moral backbone and stay on which to rest. That little woman opposite him would not only help him to rule his shabby kingdom, she would fight all his battles single-handed, win victory if victory were to be won, or render defeat bearable by the strong enduring mental fibre which would fail only with her failing breath.

Lucy was fussing about as usual with cushions and footstools, looking more shamefaced than either of the married culprits, whose marriage, concealed or revealed, had long been a familiar fact to them.

'Where is Celia?' Jem, missing her, asked sharply, while a spot of red rose in his pale cheeks, and his trembling hands trembled more than ever.

'She is not dining with us to-day,' said Mrs. Endicott curtly; 'but I think she will to-morrow.'

He said no more, and ate his dinner in peace.

Celia, ignominiously foiled in her first and last attempt at utterly ignoring Kitty's priority, had far too much native sagacity to prolong a useless struggle, and persist in a losing game.

She submitted tacitly to admit that Jem's wife was mistress of Blackhall and whatever it contained. Celia even showed a puzzling chameleon-like swiftness in changing her colours; she speedily professed an exaggerated deference to Mrs. Endicott and her supposed tastes and opinions, while the person making the profession indemnified herself by dealing to her plebeian sister-in-law innumerable small stinging blows and home-thrusts, and launching at her Parthian darts of the kind to which Lucy and Lady Jones were well accustomed. Brave, self-reliant Kitty bore them unflinchingly, and presented an unmoved front to the enemy and to Jem, while in secret she would pant and writhe under the torture. But she said to herself she was better off than she deserved, if Jem would only get well again, and the child come home. Her father had forgiven her. Jem had insisted on going to the Furze Bush the first day he was out, and taking the blame on himself.

Tom Carew had been easily pacified. He had even promised

to come up to Blackhall when there was no company there, and see his daughter and his grandson, whose existence was still as great a marvel to Tom as to the child's Aunt Lucy, only in his case it was a marvel dashed with woeful regret that his little Kitty could so have stolen a march upon him, and played him false.

Mr. Barnes of Barnes Clyffe took Kitty under his wing, and was good to her, as he had a habit of being in a paternal fashion to the whole district, and though none of the other magnates followed his example as yet, Kitty felt she could bide her time, or do without them. She could also keep her old Oxcleeve neighbours, half-proud and sympathetic because of her exaltation, half-curious and covetous of it, at their proper distance, without any sudden transformation, not to say unkindness. She had been accustomed to do it as the schoolmistress, when she had early established her natural supremacy.

'Her was never like the rest; a clever mite that you could ztand in a pint-pot when her were born, to be mistress of Blackhall, in the room of the old Endicott madams! Well, the world were turned topsy-turvy, to be zewer.'

Kitty could manage Sally Beaver's occasional fits of sauciness, alternating with her habitual genuine admiration for the young mistress's all-roundness: Sally imagined the last more complete than it was. It included Kitty's handiness in the kitchen and dairy, her book-learning, her cleverness with accounts, her fine sewing, her prettiness, though she would not consent to be smart, and did not dress a bit better than in her schoolmistress days. Why she could tackle gentle and simple, from Master Jem, who was her man, to be sure, and Miss Celia down to Beaver.

There was only one drawback which seriously vexed Kitty in her undeserved subdued happiness. The vicar gave her no opportunity to beg his pardon and become reconciled to him, while she knew that next to her father she had used him worst of all; she had the most unqualified respect, well-nigh veneration, for him. When women like Kitty Endicott respect a man, they do not stint the quality and quantity of their esteem. Kitty as a girl had put her clergyman and patron, her volunteer tutor in some of her acquirements, on a pedestal from which she had never removed him. It had been part of her punishment, in the purgatory of her life, as Jem Endicott's unacknowledged wife and the vicar's schoolmistress under false pretences, to be conscious how she was deceiving and betraying a good man who had lavished favours upon her, who had been so eager to aid the poor and young of his flock and so pleased when she could second him in the work. Kitty felt there was still a stone at her heart which would never be melted so long as his glance froze her by its unsoftened condemnation. She could not so much as meet his eye in church without being chilled by it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CHILD HUGH ENDICOTT.

THE vicar's cousin Tony appeared instead of the vicar. Tony, who was not a carrion crow, only turning up in sunshiny weather, nevertheless was a harbinger of evil. He came unasked to pay his respects to the bride with an effrontery which entirely lost sight of certain withering rebuffs he had received for attempting to take impudent liberties with the little schoolmistress, the daughter of Tom Carew of the Furze Inn. She did not choose that her memory should be better than his, so far as refusing to receive him formally in the light of a visitor at Blackhall went. But the combined forces of Tony and Celia failed to rout the small Trojan Kitty from the entrenchment of her killingly civil and stony reserve.

Lucy would not hurt a fly, as Kitty had observed on their first personal acquaintance; nay, Lucy was shyly kind to her sister-in-law every time Celia's back was turned. In Celia's presence the life-long overwhelming influence of the strong-willed unscrupulous nature still carried the day, but in her absence Lucy, backed by Lady Jones, was beginning to assert herself and to free herself from her slavish bonds. She was fain to do it, because in the same breath with Jem's recovery there had come a shadow over the girl's life, something had gone out of it which she could ill spare, something which had cast a halo even round the days of remorse, terror, and trouble. There was a constant visitor at Blackhall during Jem's illness, who came no more on his recovery.

Lucy would have drooped and pined had it not been for maidenly pride, which may exist in the bosom of the meekest mildest dove in the dove-cot, and because of a lesson which she was gradually learning from Lady Jones and from Lucy's low-born kinswoman, that it did not signify so much whether people were happy and had their will, as whether they bore their burdens without oppressing their neighbours with a load which ought to be none of theirs. Was not that really to take up the Christian's cross, with many grievous stumbles and sore falls, and to bear it patiently and persistently by the help of the great Cross-bearer, as He had bidden His children do?

When all was said and done, the family at Blackhall started on an incongruous, uncomfortable life. To Celia it was detestable, to Lucy only bearable because of her innocent docile nature—the freshness of which was not yet faded, or the affectionateness frittered away, or the sweetness soured.

Of course the life was best to Jem and Kitty, for they had known heavier crosses and more bitter trials. The two, who had really loved each other—however undesirable the match might appear in the eyes of the world—had been parted, and had come together as they had hardly hoped to do. They had all things in common, like the disciples of old, were able to proclaim their union before God and man, and could draw a long breath over their freedom for all time to come from the subterfuges and frauds which their souls had loathed. Kitty was right with regard to the other delinquent as well as to herself, that they had come out of the mess which they had made of their lives far better than they deserved.

It was the Miss Endicotts for whom the arrangement of staying on with Jem and the wife he had selected was so odd, and so likely to be jarring and unsatisfactory. The upper classes in the neighbourhood, though they had held the girls in scant esteem, were moved to pity them. 'These wretched Endicott girls, what will they not do now when the very name of a home of their own is taken from them, and they have to see a low-bred woman sitting at the head of their brother's table—such as it is?' Mrs. Reynolds was constantly reflecting.

'It would have been much better if Celia and you had come to me, though it were only for a time,' Lady Jones said regretfully to Lucy. 'Jem and his wife would have got leisure and liberty to shake down into their places. You would not have been a constant restraint upon them. She would not have been the provocation to you which I am afraid she cannot help being.'

'Oh! I don't mind,' said Lucy, with forced cheerfulness. 'The more I know of Kitty, I am sure I shall like her the better. We shall get accustomed to each other's ways, and will get on quite well, I have no doubt. As for Celia, it is her own doing, but please, dear Lady Jones, don't press her to reconsider her determination. If she is let alone, if she thinks nobody cares, it is just possible she may come round; but if she gets it into her head that we wish it very much, there is no chance. I am afraid it is all my blame,' said poor Lucy remorsefully. 'I have always been so silly, as she says. I have given in to her till she finds no satisfaction in having her own way. I have made her fanciful and capricious.'

'My dear little Lucy,' said Lady Jones, stroking the yellow hair with such lingering fondness that the girl, who had been rarely caressed, thrilled under the endearing touch, 'you must have a broad back if you are to become the scapegoat for all Celia's offences in this line. But it is true that you would spoil a saint.'

'No, no, don't you say so, or I shall not have any confidence in myself or comfort in life left. It is so weak and absurd to go about first tempting and then exasperating people.'

Another era at Blackhall was ushered in by the arrival of the

child who had spent his infancy in a still more obscure corner of Devonshire, and was now come to grow up in his father's house, the acknowledged heir to the estate, and to as much of Jem's debts and difficulties as he might not be able, even when backed by Kitty and Lady Jones, to knock off. Here was a little Hugh Endicott who was to the memory of the old Hugh what the first Prince of Wales, by the subtle device of the crafty King of England, was to the principality in which he was installed. Little Hugh's mouth had spoken no foul or wicked words. He had borne no arms against the laws of righteousness and human kindness. He had not been born at Blackhall, indeed, but he should have been, and he had now come to dwell in it as his home and his future inheritance.

Little Hugh was a ludicrous small edition of his big father, doubtless of his grandfather, if there had been anybody to recall the days of wild Hugh's innocence and helplessness.

Jem and Kitty made a feint to keep their feelings well within bounds, and to cast a modest veil over their smothered, pent-up affection for the child, which had at last found vent, and might have swept away everything before it; for, as Kitty persisted in remembering, they had forfeited the agreeable consciousness of receiving their deserts, and were better off than they merited. It was certain that she, for one parent, would always be strict in her devotion to her child's highest welfare.

No such embargo, either as to indulging their feelings or expressing their sentiments, was laid upon Lucy and Lady Jones. Lucy took refuge from her heart-sickness in suffering herself to sink willingly into the profoundest depths of baby-worship. She was positively exultant when she accompanied little Hugh and his nurse on their first visit to Lady Jones at the Court.

The child, a chubby, precocious, two-years-and-a-half old boy, rosy cheeked and curly-headed, would soon show the budding manly ambitions and affections which are the pride and delight of mothers and nurses. Instead of wearing the homely, uncouth clothes in which Celia's imagination had invested him, he was clad in the daintiest of suits. The making of such clothes had been the only thing, except praying for him day and night, which his mother could do on his behalf. She had lavished such toil upon him, wearing out eyes and fingers and youthful health and beauty in the late hours she had kept, because conscience would not let her sleep, and she could give the time to him.

'He was a child to set before a king,' Lucy cried, involuntarily parodying a nursery rhyme. As the cavalcade, the observed of all observers, wended its way through the labyrinths of cottages and goose-greens which constituted Oxcleeve, the small hero, far from being frightened by the files of geese which had not so long ago sufficed to daunt his Aunt Lucy, put out

a fat forefinger, cried 'Bo!' and showed himself the young monarch of the denizens of the country.

Lady Jones saw the party coming, went trembling to the door, and managed to take the child in her arms and carry him to the low chair by her sitting-room fire. There she fell to weeping over him so passionately, that Lucy, the only other person present, cried out in dismay: 'Oh! what have I done to hurt you? I thought you would like to see Jem's baby, such a fine baby, and so prettily dressed—all his mother's handiwork, though she was from morning to night in the school. But I should have asked beforehand whether you would care to see him. I ought not to have taken you by surprise, and overcome you by the shock,' finished Lucy, full of regrets and apologies, and yet in her own mind bewildered as to what the supposed shock which she had fallen back upon could have been.

'You did nothing, nothing, my dear, except what was right and kind,' said Lady Jones, through the sobs which still shook her. 'Don't reproach yourself. Of course, I am glad to see Jem's child. It is long since there has been a baby at Blackhall, is it not? So you are Hugh Endicott—another Hugh Endicott,' her lips quivered when she said the name.

'Yes, that was baby's grandfather's name,' said Lucy in a confidential tone, which was at the same time low and troubled; 'but you know we never speak of him, because, though he was my own father, and perhaps I ought not to mention it, I believe he was a dreadful, miserable man.'

'Oh! hush! hush! Lucy,' exclaimed Lady Jones, with horror stealing into her eyes and voice. 'You do not know, you can never tell how he was tried, and what he suffered. He may have been mad long before he drove other people out of their senses; it is such a lamentable mistake, for which they often pay all their lives, when young people learn to sit in judgment and sentence those who have gone before them, who may have been God-forsaken and lost when their would-be judges were still safe and happy in their irresponsible childhood. Besides, he may be, he is in a certain sense, present in his descendant—the old Hugh Endicott in the new. Do not slander the grandfather to his grandson's face.'

'No, I will not, indeed; I could never think of such a thing,' protested Lucy, hurt as well as perplexed, and a little frightened to boot. 'Will you let me ask you something, if it will not grieve you very much to answer me?' ('It would explain everything,' she said to herself.) She went on with transparent, coaxing entreaty. 'Had you ever a dear little child of your own, Lady Jones? that you lost, perhaps? Oh! I should have thought of the possibility of that.'

'Never a child,' said Lady Jones with unutterable sadness. 'Do you think a child would have been sent to me? Never a *child; but* I had a father once.'

Lucy did not see the connection between the incontrovertible statement and her question. Happily she became occupied in thinking how fortunate it was, and what a sensible courageous child it showed little Hugh to be, that at two years and a half he had not screamed and kicked in response to Lady Jones's torrent of tears and passionate caresses. He had not been discomposed by her white hair and cap and her black dress. He had contented himself with sitting on her knee and staring solemnly up in her face.

'I never saw such a beautifully behaved child,' exclaimed Lucy in positive ecstasy.

'He is not angry with me, Lucy?' said Lady Jones, with piteous wistfulness. 'You do not think he is angry? Oh! if you only knew what a relief that is.'

'No, of course not; he is not angry, he is not startled even, which would only be natural,' said Lucy, confidently and fluently. 'I begin to understand all about it—that it is such a comfort when baby takes kindly to strangers and does not spoil everything by crying and hiding his face, and appearing as unlike his darling little self as possible.'

The child had a peculiar effect on Celia. At first she drew away her skirts from him, and gave him as wide a berth as she could. But the small creature paid no more heed to Celia's avoidance of him than to Lady Jones's lamentations over his head. He toddled to Celia's and Lucy's door and hammered on the panels as freely as to other people's doors. He carried his toys to her to be admired or repaired, as the case might be, with the most unquestioning faith in her attention to his wants. He proposed to climb on her knee, and went so far as to ask for a kiss from her.

It is said little children and animals always know, under whatever disguise, the people who really like them and behave accordingly. It was not so with little Hugh Endicott. He was either very stolid or very determined, and his unbounded confidence was awkward even to a woman who stood at nothing, like his Aunt Celia. After she had resisted the unconscious coolness and wonderful simplicity of the child's advances to the utmost, she grew baffled and condescended to make a compromise.

'I declare,' said Lucy in amazement and triumph, from her seat in the child's nursery which she haunted, speaking to Kitty who was beside her, 'I hear Celia opening the sitting-room door to little Hugh. He has been drumming at it for the last ten minutes. I have been hurrying to get this wool wound to run and open it for him, and Celia has been before me!'

'Yes,' said Kitty dryly, 'and she has told him to run away and play and not tease her any more. He will climb the chairs till he fall, or he will tumble into the fire. I must go and look after him till that girl Nancy, who always stays so long when she is sent on an errand to the village, comes back.'

'No, please let me; I shall like it above all things. There, I hear Nancy, so I may finish my wool-winding and you may put the cot in order. But, Kitty, it is not the first time Celia has done something for baby. I saw her pick him up and take him away from the stairs yesterday, when he was at another of his dear little climbing feats.'

'And then she shook him till he lost his balance, and subsided on the floor,' said Kitty, with a twinkle in her dark eyes.

'But he did not mind the shaking, or the finding his level, indeed he did not; he thought it was part of a game and great fun. And do you know what Celia said when she saw him laughing, "That small urchin is fond of me!" She said it not only as if she was surprised and amused, but as if she was gratified; I am sure of it.'

'Don't fancy such a thing,' answered Kitty, with a look of annoyance and alarm coming into her eyes. She did not desire her boy to fall, at however early a stage, under Celia Endicott's influence. Kitty's good judgment was swift to recognise that here was a weapon ready for Celia's hand, if she set herself to use it. She wished to change the conversation so far. 'If Hughie does not mind a shaking, I must find some other punishment to keep him from the stair and the draw-well in the yard. I must begin to whip him soundly.'

'Whip the pet! a baby like that!' protested Lucy, with the old ready tears rising to her blue eyes at the unexampled barbarity of which she could never have supposed that the child's mother would be guilty.

'Certainly, if I am not to have him break his neck or be drowned, while a whipping will do him no harm. I know his father will only threaten him, and a young child does not understand threatening. I must set about whipping him at once,' said Jem's virago resolutely.

The child was a resource in such an awkwardly constructed household; even Celia attained some perception of the fact. At the same time the interest and happiness, however restrained and soberly expressed, which her companions had in the small boy, irritated Celia, as the happiness of others, in which she had so small a share, always provoked her and prompted her to administer sharp corrections of pain and humiliation.

It was a fine winter's day; there was a crisp sprinkling of snow; there were icicles hanging from the old sun-dial. The upper pent-house portion of the holly-stack was brilliant with a great crop of scarlet berries. As for the moor it lay cold and still and far stretching, as if all the world were dead and its sins and sorrows hidden away under a spotless shroud. Kitty had dressed her child out in his warm velveteen walking suit, and let him loose for a few minutes to feed the birds, kick up the flying snow, and scamper after it to make his first snowball.

His mother was watching him from a window, to which Lucy had also gone to admire him.

Celia spoke abruptly from the cosiest chair nearest the fire. 'That child is not unlike what I remember one of my brothers, who died quite young. The other child had just such a large head, and he took water on the brain and died in a week.'

'I don't think there is anything out of the way about baby's head,' said the mother quietly, but the cheek turned to Celia twitched slightly and her lips lost a shade of their vermilion.

'Nonsense!' cried Lucy, with a remarkable amount of heat and disdain. 'How can you say there is any likeness? You cannot remember our poor little brothers. I am sure I have not the slightest recollection of either of them—unless it be,' and she hesitated for a second, 'of a little coffin, which I suppose must have belonged to one of them. As for our baby, he is as healthy-looking a child as ever lived.'

'You are a fine judge of babies, including Jem's, whom you seem needlessly appropriating! I am a little older than you; I can perfectly remember the child I am referring to. I believe there was an impression that he might have had some fall when he was still younger, in fact, an infant, which might have been overlooked at the time—servants and third persons are careless—and yet have left its effect on his constitution. The doctor said the consequences of such an injury might have lasted his whole life, if he had lived. In that case it was a blessing he died, for otherwise he would have been an idiot,' finished Celia with philosophy, as she proceeded to thread her needle.

There was another and more violent twitch of Kitty's cheek.

'Well, our baby is anything save an idiot,' said Lucy, in cheerful defiance, falling again into the use of the objectionable possessive pronoun. 'It is the next thing to miraculous what he observes and how he reasons from it. If anything, he is too clever. You must keep him back in his education,' addressing Kitty; 'I should so like to teach him his letters when he is fit for it.'

'You had better leave that to a person of greater experience,' said Celia, with her ready sneer. 'By-the-by, I suppose you are going your usual pilgrimage to the Court; but you may spare yourself the trouble to-day. There is another worshipper at the shrine before you. I saw the vicar go in when I was coming back from the moor a quarter of an hour ago. "Admirable man," as the Reynolds woman says, "how assiduously he visits his parishioners!" though he seems to have left us out in the cold lately. But our loss is Lady Jones's gain, as pious people say of the deaths of the relatives whom they do not wish alive again.'

Lucy had looked a little confused at the beginning of her sister's speech; now she was staring blankly at Celia.

'You need not look so surprised,' said Celia coolly, 'His

attentions have always been rather marked in that quarter. Latterly they have become much more so. I find his cousin draws the same deduction as I do; really there is no other to draw. It is remarkable when one thinks of the unselfishness of our clergy, that golden prizes so often fall to their lot. It must be an interposition of Providence on their behalf.'

'But, Celia,' said Lucy, all white and trembling, 'he and she are only friends. Think how much older she must be, and that she is infirm; a widow who, except coming to us out of simple humanity, goes nowhere.'

'I was not aware that I was an object of humanity, any more than of charity,' said Celia, lifting up her chin superciliously. 'And have you forgotten "*les beaux yeux de la coquette*"? Your French needs rubbing up. Did you ever finish Daudet? because, if you have, Tony North will carry on your education by lending you a few choice specimens of Zola. However, you understand enough of the language to grasp the explanation I have hinted at. When the marriage comes off, I dare say she will be accommodated with a seat during the ceremony; and I shall not think she has treated you fairly if she does not ask you to be one of her bridesmaids. A widow's principal bridesmaid ought to be a widow, I have heard, and you cannot be that all at once, as I know you would, if you could, to oblige her; but she may stretch a point in your favour.'

Kitty was looking at the sisters—the one operating with the relish of a skilled operator, the subject quivering under the knife. 'Celia is worse than any Red Indian I have ever read of,' thought the looker-on with strong repulsion, 'and the first and last creature she tortures is her own gentle, defenceless sister!'

'Lucy!' her sister-in-law called her, 'baby is getting his feet wet, and his fingers will be frozen in spite of his mittens. Do you mind putting on your hat, wrapping a shawl round you, and carrying him round the garden to see the icicles and the holly-berries?'

Lucy fled precipitately on the apology supplied to her, and by the time she had put Kitty's programme into execution—fetched a hat and shawl and gone out into the frosty air, clasping the child in her arms, under the necessity of chattering to him—something of the stricken look and the deadly paleness which the operator's knife had called into her face passed from it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SPANISH MADAM AGAIN, WITH ANOTHER GHOST, HOVERING ON THE THRESHOLD.

At last the neighbourhood was gently titillated by the arrival of visitors for Lady Jones at the Court. If she had no relations she had friends—intimate enough to come some distance to see her, and take up their quarters with her for a week—old enough friends to have known her in Australia, an item which soon came to light. A lively interest was felt in the strangers, and Mrs. Reynolds called on them as soon as the etiquette in which she was a proficient would permit. 'Now we shall get at the bottom of dear Lady Jones's belongings and antecedents,' Mrs. Reynolds told herself, with a smirk of prospective satisfaction. 'These Australians will be clever indeed if they baffle and bamboozle me.'

But they did baffle and bamboozle her, if, indeed, there was any tale worth unfolding to unfold. Yet instead of looking like the clever, sharp performers of such a part, the two—there was just a pair of the strangers—appeared the simplest, mildest old gentleman and lady in the world. The heathen Chinee was not more deep and specious, if they were deep and specious, for theirs was art so perfect that it could not be distinguished from nature. Dr. and Mrs. Baring were both of them small, spare, and white-haired, with a greater right to be hoary, so far as years went, than their hostess possessed. The couple were dainty and fragile, looking as if a breath of air would blow them away. Yet with that curious, contradictory strain of wiriness and elasticity in their composition which seemed to promise that they would survive younger and stronger people, they were warranted in coming all the way from Australia to spend one last year in England, and bid a final farewell to it before returning to the country of their adoption.

Dr. and Mrs. Baring were patterns of respectability and discretion. Yes, they had known their friend Lady Jones for a long time now, and they had known the late Sir Benjamin as well. No, he was not a very rough diamond. He was considerably older than his wife, certainly; a plain, unassuming man, perhaps, but one of the most intelligent, as he was one of the best and most highly respected men in his division of the great colony. Yes, they had known Lady Jones before her marriage; indeed, she was married from their house; that was because she was left alone; the relative with whom she had quitted England was dead. As they had known both Lady Jones and Sir Benjamin for some time, the couple had done the Barings the honour of being married from their house. Yes, it had been an excellent marriage for Lady Jones; Sir Benjamin had been much attached

to her, as she was to him, and he had bequeathed her the bulk of his fortune, while he had not cut off his nephews and nieces with a shilling—they had been handsomely provided for.

Lady Jones did not break her rule about not seeing company when her friends were with her. She did not even take them to Blackhall, a little to Lucy Endicott's mortification; while Mrs. Reynolds's interpretation of the omission was that Lady Jones was ashamed, before her friends, of the singular cronies she had picked up, when so much better a choice had lain before her.

From this circumstance, and from her domestic engagements, Lady Jones had been comparatively little with her late patient and his family for some time.

There were points in common between Kitty and Lucy, though Kitty was strong as steel and Lucy was weak as wax. They were both diligent and dutiful, though Lucy's diligence had been somewhat paltry in its results, and Kitty had made a great lapse from her duty. They were both exact and precise in their different ways, an exactness which in Lucy had degenerated into finicking habits, and in Kitty had taken the form of primness, with a dash of prudery. Kitty was much the more severe and solid in her taste in dress and furniture, while Lucy was addicted to ornament and flummery; but both had the instinctive, exquisite neatness which has something to do with a certain mental purity and propriety. They agreed splendidly on the half-window-blind question, and aided and abetted each other in supplying Blackhall with eyelids to all its eyes, from garret to basement.

Kitty, with an accomplishment or two less, was far more thoroughly educated and better informed than Lucy; but though Kitty could have undertaken to prove the baselessness of a belief in ghosts, and the utter illogicalness of their having any abnormal existence in what is, for the most part to our short-sighted eyes, the harmonious economy of the universe, she had not escaped the effect of centuries of isolated Devonshire superstitions filtering down to the latest natives. She had not seen the ghostly dreariness of the moor at certain seasons, and heard the wind howling and shrieking over the vast waste to no purpose. She had not sat as a sharp little child in the ingle nook of the Furze Bush, and been a witness to the unbounded faith of the country people in the supernatural—heart-rending, hideous, or grotesque in its homeliness as it was represented by primitive folk with long heads, fierce passions, and glimmerings of inextinguishable tenderness in their common nature—without receiving impressions which no subsequent education and experience could efface.

On one winter night the family circle at Blackhall were gathered round the sitting-room hearth, the women with their needle-work, Jem with his newspaper suffered to fall on his

knee, the group looking less forlornly divided, and more friendly than usual. Some passing allusion was made to the manifestations of the Spanish Madam during the past summer. Jem scouted at them and derided them, as he had done all along.

Kitty did not join with him. 'Don't speak so, Jem,' she tried to silence him. 'We do not know everything; we cannot tell what God may or may not permit. We are not even so intimately acquainted with the uses of things as to be entitled to say positively, as people often do, "Where would be the use of a spirit's showing itself?" Did you ever see it?' drawing closer to Lucy, and speaking in a half-whisper, while the wooden pins with which she was knitting a cravat for Jem remained arrested in her hands.

'I!' exclaimed Lucy, looking as much startled and troubled as if she were called on to confront the ghost in person, and not merely to acknowledge a passing acquaintance with her. 'Yes—no. I mean I may have seen the person who played the trick—that may be, of course, whether I know it or not. But oh! don't you think it is wicked to play such senseless tricks, when it is just possible that such awful occurrences happen as the return of the dead to the earth? No, I am thankful to say I never saw the real Spanish Madam,' with a shiver, 'and if she should ever return to Blackhall, I hope she will not come to me, for I am sure I should go out of my wits, or just die on the spot.'

Kitty shivered sympathetically, and said hurriedly, 'I hope nobody will frighten baby. After all, it is better not to speak of such things or think of them.'

'I don't agree with you,' said Celia in her laziest tones. 'I enjoy hearing all I can of this shade of my ancestress, and I take it quite ill that it should never look near me.'

The very next day, as if it were in answer to the reproach, or a case of 'speak of angels and lo! the flutter of their wings,' the Spanish Madam was heard of again at the house which had been her home centuries before, and it was to Celia that she appeared. The favoured person was in no respects daunted by the compliment paid her, while she solemnly declared that she had encountered the appearance of the long-dead lady in the corridor outside the door of the sisters' room. The narrator described minutely the Spanish Madam's dress and bearing according to tradition and precedent, the lace shrouding the head and face, the long cloak, the time-honoured gestures signifying extreme cold, for which, as Celia broke the thread of her discourse to remark dispassionately, there was every excuse that either mortal or immortal could claim in the rawness of a February evening. She had not been frightened, she had kept all her wits about her, but she could not make up her mind to speak first according to ghostly etiquette. She had an uncomfortable impression that there might be awkward inquiries and com-

ments with regard to recent events in the family, since she had always heard that the Spanish, as a nation, were full of *hauteur* and *esprit de corps.*

'What stuff,' growled Jem; 'you saw your shadow, or Lucy in the distance, and your imagination did the rest. You, too, Celia! I always thought that at least you were beyond bogies. The overthrow of his conviction appeared to disconcert him more than it shook Celia in her volunteered statement.

Kitty made no alteration in her habits, but she would hardly let her child out of her sight, whether she dreaded a scare for his tender years, or that his progenitress might wreak on him her vengeance for *mésalliances* in general. In spite of Kitty's vigilance little Hugh began to lisp of 'b'ack 'ady' and ''panish Madam' in a manner suggestive of a private interview on his own account, in the course of which the ghost had waived its prerogative of waiting to be addressed, and had confided its identity and name to Hughie. He was a bold, fearless child, so was not even abashed by the strange experience. He seemed rather to regard it in the light in which he had taken his Aunt Celia's shaking him—as great fun.

Lucy sat transfixed at the tales, staring at Celia as if the starer's eyes would start from her head, vehemently denying the likelihood of the appearances, as matters of fact, yet never entering bare corridor or empty room without scudding across it like a lapwing, starting at the slightest sound, shedding copious floods of tears when she was alone, and hiding her weeping with a scared face if a spectator came on the scene.

As if in obliging acknowledgment of the trembling expectation and fearful joy with which the rumour of its return was greeted and further visits looked for by the Beavers, by Zecchy Sampson, and Lovey Veale, and Oxcleeve generally, it came again to all its old haunts - mostly in the dusk of the winter afternoon, but sometimes in the late dawn or early starlight, and, just as before, if anybody had investigated the coincidence with the care which George Fielding had bestowed on it, it would have been found that there was a remarkable relation between the 'walking' of the Spanish Madam and the strolling abroad of Mr. Tony North. It was the fresh scandal of the Spanish Madam's restlessness, together with other and more disquieting rumours, which brought George Fielding a second time to Oxcleeve. He came no longer for his pleasure. He had ceased to be influenced by antiquarian, legend-identifying propensities, or by any gentle dabbling in psychology. He was spurred on by vexation of spirit and alarm, and these feelings carried him straight to the Court, into which he had not ventured to set foot since the day when Jem Endicott dragged Delaval Pool, and Lady Jones feasted gentle and simple afterwards.

George Fielding was lucky in coming up with the pony

phaeton and its occupant just as it stopped at her gate on her return from Ashford, to which she had driven her late visitors that they might take the train for Exeter.

'Don't alight,' he said to her after the first ordinary greeting. 'I am about to ask you if you will do me the favour of driving across to Blackhall, while I'll walk by your ponies.'

'Is Jem ill again?' she asked breathlessly, clutching the reins and turning the ponies' heads before he had well spoken. 'I thought I saw him with my telescope on the Tor yesterday. It might be rash of him, but Kitty said he had been as far as the Packman's Bridge the day before, and was no worse, rather the better of it.'

'There is nothing wrong with Jem,' he said, scarcely able to realise what a spent woman she was, when her feeble gait was no longer present to his eyes, when her drive had brought the faintest tinge of pink into her sun-bleached, tear-washed cheeks, and her grey eyes shone bright as diamonds under her white hair. It might have been the powdered hair of some young beauty 'made up' as her great grandmother, and bound for conquest. 'It is the Spanish madam at its pranks again,' said George. 'I know you have an interest in all the Endicotts. I have no doubt that you agree with me there must be a stop put to these stage tricks.'

'Of course,' she said sharply, her brow contracting; 'what mad, defiant folly to try them again.'

'Exposure is certain to follow sooner or later,' he said; 'indeed, if my informant told me rightly, there was a narrow escape from it the day before yesterday, when Will Tregilleas mustered as much Dutch courage from the drink he happened to have taken, to seize hold of her by the cloak. A gentleman came between, who seemed to start up for the purpose. Will was too much muddled by drink and dazed by the blow he got to recognise him, but I take it that it must have been Tony North. There is a pretty complication!'

She knit her brows again in pain and perplexity, but said nothing.

'I know there are morbid states of the body and mind which are as unaccountable as they are distressing,' he said hesitating. 'I cannot conceive how a modest, gentle girl like Lucy Endicott can indulge in such vagaries.'

'Lucy!' she cried indignantly, dropping the reins, with the risk of the ponies carrying her over a bank. 'My poor little Lucy! Are you mad yourself? How could you take such an outrageous idea into your head? It is not Lucy, it is that unhappy girl Celia!'

'Celia!' he exclaimed, in his turn stopping short; 'Celia, who discussed the whole affair with me like a lawyer, and was ready to answer every question put to her, while Lucy sat mute and quailing. Celia!' he repeated; 'well, that certainly re-

moves one great contradiction, for I could believe her equal to it, though her motive is inconceivable. But depend upon it, Lucy was in the secret. She was an accomplice, at least, if not, innocence never looked so like guilt.'

'Don't say an accomplice,' insisted Lady Jones vehemently; 'a coerced, cowed, unhappy accessory against her will, perhaps, but no more. Lucy is an innocent, simple, loving girl; as easily led or misled as a child would be. Celia cares for nothing and stops at nothing. She has the unfathomable cunning, when she chooses to exercise it, which is one feature of madness. She has no reverence, no tenderness, no fear. I do not know what harm she may not have done to Lucy, who has been at her mercy all these years. I am morally certain she has been playing Lucy off and making a catspaw of her in more ways than this for months. I would not have selected Kitty as a protector for Lucy, but in the character of Jem's wife she can afford her some protection, and one can trust her; oh! that is such a comfort.' She stopped in evident grief. He had no choice except to try her further. They were rounding the last goose-green; Blackhall gate would be in sight the next moment.

'There is something else I wish to tell you, Lady Jones,' he said slowly; 'you are kind to the people about; you know most of the poor among them; you are acquainted with Zecchy Sampson's younger brother who is bedridden and blind; you drove past his house one day last week, and called out as you did so to a boy who was flogging a donkey unmercifully. Joe Sampson sent his granddaughter to the window to see which of the Endicotts was outside. She told him there was only Lady Jones driving by with some company she had at the Court. He grew angry, and swore he would know an Endicott's voice speaking in that tone among a thousand. When the girl's mother came in the dispute was referred to her, and she said it was mighty queer she had never noticed it before, but now that the notion was put into her head she could see Lady Jones's eyes were the marrow of the old Endicotts' eyes. She was at the Ashford market, where she talked freely of what Joe had said, and what she had thought. An idle young fellow, who carries about all the gossip of the town, came to me with this mare's nest; he asked me—of all people—whether some of the late Hugh Endicott's family had not run away or disappeared more than a dozen years ago, and whether it was not possible that they might turn up unexpectedly.'

She had pulled her ponies up, and her hands on the reins were jerking them so uncertainly that he put his own hand upon hers to guard against an accident. Then she looked straight in his face and said with a full voice, 'George!' and he replied with as full a heart in his voice, 'Joanna!'

There was an instant's pause while they stood and sat

arrested there; then she gently shook off his hand, and flicked her ponies that they might go on. 'You did not know me when I came back,' she said, with the pale ghost of a smile; 'I thought it was all right then. I had feared the encounter with you more than with Jem or any one. You may remember I faced you first to see if my scheme were practicable. I thought that even if you knew me you would not betray me.'

'I did not know you in the least,' he admitted. 'You must have gone through a great deal,' he added in a lower tone.

'A great deal,' she echoed, breathing hard.

'The first time I recognised you,' he volunteered the information, 'was the day I met you at Blackhall, when you would be at the bottom of this very story of the Spanish Madam, your ancestress as well as Celia's and Lucy's, though you had not heard of her in the old days.'

'Ah! did you find me out then?' she exclaimed, as if she were half vexed, half amused. 'But you kept my secret, and you helped me to do what I wanted, though I could see that you did not half approve; while I had no suspicion of all the reasons which you had for your disapproval.'

'Yes,' he said ruefully, 'and it is not the first time you have made me help you in what I did not approve of. If it had not been for me, if I had not sold those colts for you and brought you the money—while I little guessed the use you were going to put it to—you could never have quitted Blackhall.'

A spasm of pain passed over her face. 'Do not speak of it,' she said; 'I cannot tell yet whether I was inspired for her deliverance or possessed with a devil, as I am sure more than one of the Endicotts have been.'

'But it must be spoken of,' he said firmly; 'it has come to that, for otherwise it will all come out in spite of you. You are going to tell them, and I am here to stand by you, if you will let me.'

'Old friend!' she said, with a quick emphasis of thanks; but she drooped in every line of her figure, and in a second looked aged, worn, and feeble; she who had not reached her fortieth year, and had once been a young Diana in suppleness of limb and glow of health and vigour. 'To be rejected and spurned by them all,' she said with a dry sob of anguish, 'I who have thought of them so long, and would do anything to serve them.'

'But what could you expect?' he remonstrated with a man's bluntness; 'you might have been sure that the truth would come out some day, and that before long. There never was such a thing heard of as so great a deception practised to the end where near relations as well as common acquaintances were concerned; and when the revelation is made, the discovery that you have grossly misled them is not likely to wipe out old grievances, and prepossess your family in your

favour. No doubt you were fain to load them with benefits, but these were received under a false impression. I can tell you it was the very worst policy to pursue where Jem was concerned. Don't you see it was like cheating him into swallowing a bribe? A man's whole pride and honesty would revolt at such treatment.'

He was forcing himself to put the stern truth plainly before her, in order to force her to adopt the only remedy he could see for her error. But he stopped when he saw her shrink as from a blow, and when she told him piteously the woman's foolish delusion, bred of sorrow and longing, in one who was naturally clear-sighted.

She was so much changed in the interval of fifteen years, during which the boy Jem and the children Celia and Lucy from whom she had parted must have grown up to manhood and womanhood without hearing of her, with hardly a remembrance of her which they would not seek to banish and forget, that she thought she might come back and brave the slight chance of the few older people about Oxcleeve recognising her. She was widowed, independent, rich; what was to hinder her from living near them, getting to know them as a stranger might know them, to watch over them even as she had abandoned them, to help them from her superfluity, and secure in return a few crumbs of their regard before she died? Then she would endow them with what was in her power to bestow of worldly goods, of which it was hard that she should have so much and they so little; and when she was gone it would not matter so much if her identity were discovered, for surely they would have charity for her when she lay in her grave. Yet she had been as good as dead to them these fifteen years, and her memory was still a horror.

'Events must take their course,' she said at last despairingly. 'I am here because you have summoned me to unmask Celia—not to declare myself—not at Blackhall—not in my father's house, where I last saw him and defied and renounced him,' she said with a shudder. 'I could not do it, George Fielding, you could not ask it of me. I know I am in your power, but for that very reason you will spare me, as you have always spared me. I must have time to think, to prepare myself for what may happen.'

He was compelled to acquiesce, though it was against his judgment, almost against his conscience. But a few days more or less—he was persuaded it had come to that, since suspicion was roused—would not matter much, and this madness of Celia's must be put an end to without a night's delay, unless there was to be another miserable exposure of the whole family. There would be enough inevitable exposure without that. He did not know how much reason Joanna had to dread it. She used to be brave, the bravest woman he had ever known. Was it

conscience, which makes cowards of us all, that unnerved her now? Was it the result of a monomania, come of brooding over her father's horrible denunciations and miserable fate? Courage! how could he couple the word with this poor, shaken, tempest-tossed woman, whose tottering steps he had to steady and guide as she walked feebly yet faithfully in her weakness into what must be like a lion's den or the jaws of death to her?

Lucy's affectionate, matter-of-fact greeting, Jem's gruff cordiality to Lady Jones, Kitty's quietly expressed good-will, were like a ludicrous anti-climax, or the wholesome, open-faced morning light on a ghastly nightmare. Even Celia's half-insolent challenge, 'Why do all our good things come at once? Our friends ought to have doled out the favour of their company, and not combined to overwhelm us by their united presence,' was an everyday relief. It felt for a moment as if all the trouble which lay behind and beforehand, must be the figment of a disordered brain.

The Endicotts were not alone, as was commonly the case. They had visitors; two visitors had come separately already, and these, by an irony of fate, were the vicar and his cousin. They had arrived from opposite quarters, without guessing each other's intention, and had met at Blackhall.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GEORGE FIELDING FAILS TO REVEAL THE SECOND GHOST, BUT TONY NORTH FORCES IT TO APPEAR.

MILES NORTH had nursed long enough his offended dignity, his resentment where Kitty was concerned, his sick suspicions and apprehensions with regard to Lucy. He had not yet fulfilled his painful mission to Jem, contenting himself with keeping his eye on Tony in the meantime. This watch he had found so arduous a task that he had come to the conclusion there are limits to everything, even to a clergyman and kinsman's endurance of an irreclaimable black sheep.

And a clergyman cannot cut himself off from any part of his flock. He cannot indulge in protracted personal quarrels if he be either honest or wise. As a man he may have his private opinions and feelings, his hand, like that of the Douglas of old, may be his own; but as a parson he must christen, marry and bury irrespective of his likes and dislikes. He must pray and praise and preach, and in order that there may be some hope of success, with God's blessing on his services, he must cultivate at least clerical good relations with his people.

Therefore the Rev. Miles called clerically at Blackhall, and sat stiffly on one of Lucy's not too easy chair cushions, his hat in

one hand as a signal of his speedy departure, and talked formal commonplaces. His feelings had not changed. He was conscious that he had not forgiven Kitty, who sat there in the character of his hostess, and was as stiff and formal as he was himself.

As for Celia, she had always been objectionable to him. He was a little more in charity with Jem, because Miles North knew in his heart of hearts that though Jem had done wrong and been a fool, he might have done a vast deal worse and been something else than a fool. In addition his lot had been hard, and he still looked ill. Miles kept wondering, before Lady Jones made her appearance, if she or any one else took the trouble to remark how thin Lucy Endicott was getting, and how her pretty colour went and came. He would have wondered in a still livelier and more irate fashion what Tony was seeking there, but his cousin's *début* followed that of Miles, and when the gentleman sauntered in, the awkwardness and pain which the scene involved to the vicar was intensified enormously by the gleam of sardonic malice in his relative's small twinkling eyes.

At last George Fielding and Lady Jones were added to the party, and, as Celia said, there was quite a gathering. They were sufficient for the vicar to speak a word in season to them if he thought fit.

'Do,' said Tony, addressing the clergyman with bland patronage, 'now that you have been so fortunate as to catch your birds,' he finished, in unblushing allusion to his own notorious practice of absenting himself from church.

Miles frowned.

George Fielding came to his aid, and also supplied the keynote to Lady Jones. George had come to the conclusion that it was well Celia's fellow-offender was there, and perhaps it was not ill that the vicar was likewise in the company. 'What is this I hear, Endicott, of your troublesome ancestress's again disturbing the tranquillity of the village?'

'Oh, bosh!' cried Jem angrily. 'I think the whole world is gone mad about that idiotic story. What should she disturb anybody for? She was well enough off in her day, I understand. I wish other people had fared as well.'

Lady Jones was ready to interpose, but Tony North was before her, suggesting obligingly that his cousin ought to lay the ghost. Tony believed the most approved plan was to read a chapter of the Bible, and call on the spirit to appear and say what it wanted.

'That might not be so easy,' said Celia pleasantly, 'if spirits are like human beings.'

'They are very like human beings,' said Lady Jones intrepidly from the chair in which she had been recovering her strength. 'They wear nineteenth-century lace, woven at Nottingham and bought from Bliss in Ashford. I have seen lace

in his shop the same as a bit I picked up when I was in the lumber-room here which the ghost is said to haunt, and where, no doubt, it left a small portion of its head-gear behind it unnoticed. I have also had a minute description of its Andalusian mantle, and I have reason to think it is simply a fur cloak with the black silk lining turned outwards.'

There was a stifled shriek from Lucy, who hid her face in her hands, and looks of surprise and bewilderment from Jem and the vicar. Kitty started and glanced keenly from one sister to the other. Celia and Tony did not look at each other. Perhaps if they had his covert signal would have been 'Impossible to prove. The best policy is to profess utter ignorance of her meaning.'

But Celia loved a scene; strife was indeed the breath of her nostrils. She had a curious diseased passion for distinction of any kind, and she was getting tired of the poor little game which it was evident was played out. She gave one of her rather boisterous laughs. 'So I am detected! But it has been a piece of good fun where little fun was going. Didn't I do it cleverly, to impose upon so many people, actually to bring over Mr. Fielding twice from Ashford to investigate the phenomena? But you don't seem half to enjoy the joke, now that it is laid before you, you stupid, straight-laced creatures; still, I think I shall make you laugh when I tell you that Lucy—ha, ha!—knew it all the time—could not help knowing it, as we share the same room; and not only did she not tell—I took care of that—she was as frightened for the Spanish Madam's coming behind her and catching hold of her as any of you could be. Ha, ha! She was the most abject of my victims. But I did not take her cloak this time, though I have borrowed it on previous occasions; that grey dust-cloak of yours, Lu, even if it would have stood for the long black 'Lusian, was only too conspicuous, and had been too much associated with a person who shall be nameless. No, he shall not be nameless, on second thoughts; I do not wish to fail in my acknowledgment to my *collaborateur*. I could not have managed without the assistance of Mr. Tony North, there. Now, Mr. Tony, you ought to lead me into the middle of the room, that we may bow our gratitude for the applause which I must say our highly respectable audience are somewhat slow of bestowing on us, though we have supplied them gratis with an excellent entertainment, lasting over a period of months.'

Celia stood confronting everybody, her head thrown back, her eyes gleaming.

Tony North, with all his effrontery, did not come forward, at her invitation, to share the situation. He drew back with an annoyed, discomfited air.

'Celia,' began Jem in a towering rage, 'if I had thought you could have been capable of this low horse play——'

'A lesson in manners from Jem!' exclaimed Celia. 'There

will be one from Mrs. Endicott next.' Then her mood changed, and she turned quick as lightning, on Lady Jones, a face distorted with fury and hatred.

And who and what are you who have come intruding and meddling here? Nobody knows anything about you, which in itself is a suspicious circumstance; you may have come of the vilest of the vile, you may have been the most worthless of women, for anything that anybody here can tell. All I know is that I have nothing to do with you, and yet I will tell you what you have done to me; you have taken my sister from me, you have abetted my brother in a low marriage, from the degradation of which he will never recover; and now you presume to call me to account—you! you! Is there no reckoning to settle between you and me?'

'Settle it,' said George Fielding in an undertone to Lady Jones, beside whose chair he was standing. 'Tell her—tell them all. Do not let her dare to insult you further, or, by Heavens, I will not stand it. I'll speak without your leave.'

Her white face was the colour of ashes. She put up her trembling hands, not knowing what she did, and pushed back her white hair till it lay in ruffled flakes. She looked round with a wild appealing glance. 'Jem,' she gasped.

He came to her side instantly.

'What do you wish, Lady Jones?' he asked in his blunt, puzzled way. 'I am not accountable for this monstrous attack made upon you, though I am as sorry for it and ashamed of it as if I were. Celia is my sister, of course, but after what she has already confessed I can have nothing more to do with her. I have borne a good deal as it is, but she must take herself and her tomboy pranks elsewhere. We shall be the talk of the neighbourhood, but you need not mind that; it will not affect you. Let me or Fielding take you home, and put an end to this disgraceful row.'

'And is Miss Lucy to be held free from blame?' cried Celia jeeringly, in her mad impulse to strike on every side, to inflict more pain, and render confusion worse confounded. 'Dear, simple, goody-goody Lucy; Lady Jones's pet, one of the vicar's lambs, who took on an account for fine clothes at Bliss's without her beloved brother's knowledge, and in her scrupulous honesty and sweet candour actually borrowed the money to pay her little bill from that benevolent friend of ours, who is too modest to show himself at the present moment, Mr. Tony North. She is to my knowledge still owing him the enormous sum of five pounds. Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Lucy Endicott sold her reputation—her soul, people who believe in souls might say—for five pounds! At least she was humble with regard to the price at which she rated herself; the rudest village girl could not have been less exacting. Pray don't forget the innocent Lucy when you are dealing me my deserts.'

'Is this true, Lucy?' cried Jem hoarsely. 'Good Lord! what sisters I have!'

'Hush, hush, Jem! wait and hear what she has to say,' cried Kitty, putting her hand on his arm.

George Fielding and Lady Jones were staggered by the further revelation which they had not provoked, though the disclosure itself was not wholly unexpected.

The vicar's head remained so bent, that sitting as he was in the shadow, nobody could see his face. Was it because he did not know whether to go or stay? Was he wishing the Endicotts would not wash their dirty linen in his presence?

Lucy in her anguish was beyond caring; she was shamed before all the world, and so it might be before him too. 'Oh, Jem!' she cried, 'you may kill me, but I did not mean to do wrong to you or any human creature. It was because you were so poor and hard pressed at the time. She said I must have the things, and it would be easy enough to tell you afterwards. She would not suffer me to speak to Lady Jones; she advised me to let Mr. Tony North lend me the money. She laughed at me, they both laughed at me, for minding. But I knew after I had done it that it was something wicked. I have never had a happy moment since I could not tell you. I have had thoughts of telling Kitty, but I knew she would never have run into debt. Oh! I wished when you were ill that I could have died instead of you. I wish—I wish it now.'

There was a stir through the room at the poor young girl's agony of remorse and humiliation. Lady Jones sprang up as she was apt to do when she forgot her infirmity, and swayed to and fro in her progress towards Lucy. Miles North raised his bent head and gave a look at his cousin, as if, man of peace and of a sacred vocation though the vicar was, he could have slain Tony where he sat.

It was that gentleman with his satyr face who at last deigned to defend himself, or rather, like Celia, to turn the accusation on another.

'We have heard a few interesting family details,' he said in his sneering tones; 'we ought to be flattered by being taken behind the domestic curtain—at least, those not implicated in the offences ought to be. Unfortunately, I am doubly implicated, soft-hearted, easy-going beggar that I am! But I, too, have something to tell you. I have my surprise in store, which I think you will own beats the others hollow. Talking of ghosts, I have had the honour to assist in raising one, as you have heard; but upon my word I have had nothing to do with the other, to which I am about to introduce you. Were you aware that there were two ghosts haunting this highly favoured locality? No? Well, there are, I assure you. I heard of the second in Ashford this morning, when I was returning from spending a few days in

town. Oddly enough, the last ghostly rumour exactly corresponded with a piece of information of which I had just become master. When I was up in London, I had the happiness to meet a friend of yours, Lady Jones,' he turned to her and addressed the rest of his conversation to her individually, speaking with the greatest suavity. 'To speak more correctly, it was a friend of your late husband. This gentleman, Mr. Benjamin Jones, I believe a nephew of Sir Benjamin's, made me acquainted with a very curious circumstance, for the truth of which he pledged himself. He said his respected uncle had married late in life a lady much younger than himself. She was not a native of the colony, she was from America in the first place, but she had come there from England. He was under the impression that she had belonged originally to Devonshire. She passed under the name of Miss Elliot. He could not tell why she had taken another name than her own, but he had reason to know that she had done so, for she had to be married under her real name, which he had seen, and it was Endicott—"Joanna Endicott." A Devonshire woman—an Endicott—a Joanna—the christian name of the Spanish Madam.' he told off each item on a separate finger. 'A most singular chain of coincidences to lead to nothing, wouldn't you say?' demanded Tony insinuatingly, with his head on one side, his eyes looking at nobody and nothing in particular.

Long before he had finished, two of the company knew well what was coming. The others, even Celia, were taken out of themselves—out of what had been engrossing them, and stood thunderstruck and incredulous.

Jem had not recovered his full strength since his late illness, and he reeled under the great shock, so that Kitty, apparently hanging upon him, was in reality holding him up. 'It is not true,' he said through his set teeth, glaring round him while he spoke; 'she could not be so brazen, so——'

'Oh, Jem!' a woman's voice shrieked in horror, 'do not you say it. Do not blast my name and curse me as my father cursed me.'

Then it seemed as if all the others present fell into the background and sank into insignificance, while the interview was between her and Jem alone, and they two would have forgotten the presence of the whole world had it been there to see.

She had dragged herself to his side; she did not presume to touch him, even by falling at his feet and clinging to them. She stood erect, though shaking in every limb, a solitary figure in her widow's dress, her hands falling at her sides, waiting to receive her sentence.

'I do not know what I have done,' groaned Jem, 'to be so hardly visited. Woman, why have you come to me? Are you aware that your presence here is an insult and a pollution?

What had I ever done to injure you, that you should venture to come near me, and when I had not the most distant suspicion of who was thus outraging common decency, thrust upon me your wretched wealth and insolent favours, which I will fling back, though I have to beg bread for myself and Kitty and the child.'

'Stop,' she said, in a voice imperative and impressive, because of its sudden quietness of despair. 'I know I committed a great sin against God and man. It was horrible, unnatural, almost impious. I sat in judgment on my own father. I condemned him and renounced him and every claim he had upon me; and he was not only old compared to me—a man who had suffered and been disappointed in a thousand ways which I could not guess then—he was my father, the author of my being. It was almost like arraigning God to challenge him—I could never prosper or be happy again, could I? But it was for her. Don't you remember, Jem, when he spoke to her as if she were a dog one day, and you, a boy, were standing by, you said aside to me that if he did that after you were a man, you would strike him down where he stood? You could not help it. I could not help it. It was to save her, and she was saved.' A sudden gleam of triumph shot across her wan face. 'It was hard for her at first,' she went on in a low tone, half speaking to herself, and as she did so unconsciously lifting up the veil which had so long shrouded her history. 'She had not been accustomed to that kind of hardship, and she was a soft-natured woman to whom it did not come easily. I was young and strong, but of course I had greatly overrated my powers in my self-conceit, and I had difficulty in keeping her from starving. But people who knew something of us helped us; when I say knew something, I mean they saw what we were doing, and took us on trust —God bless them for it. Then, when I got more work and better pay, and she could have a few comforts, she was reconciled to her fate; she used to be so glad when I came back to her at night—oh! it is good to have some one to meet and welcome you. She was as patient as a lamb in her last illness. She spoke of you all, who never wished to hear of her again, and sent messages to you, though I had no hope of ever delivering them.'

'Is it my mother you are speaking of?' a mystified young voice broke in from the outer circle, speaking in agitation which could not be suppressed. 'Was that my mother, of whom I have always been frightened to think? Was she like that? Are you not Lady Jones, but Joanna? Were you working hard for our mother, and suffering such want as never came near us, though we called ourselves poor and we had given you up, and believed all manner of evil against you? Oh! forgive me, forgive me, to whom you have always been so good and kind!' and Lucy crossed the floor and placed herself by Joanna

making what amends she could to her lost sister by giving in her adherence to her on the spot.

The simple acknowledgment was precious to the poor woman, who had been so long alone, who had been so grievously misjudged, and then suddenly dragged from her hiding-place and compelled to appear at the cruellest bar of all—that of an alienated family, in which natural affection has been choked at its source and converted into hatred. She caught Lucy's hand and kissed it passionately, and held it to comfort and strengthen her.

'Yes, Lucy, that was our mother, weak and erring, but heavily punished and saved at last, thank God. She was a loving soul; she often spoke of you, her youngest pet, and of Celia—how quick and independent she was—and of her boy Jem.'

'It is too late,' said Jem sullenly, 'even if you had not first sought to close my mouth by a sop.'

'It is incredible,' said Celia coldly; 'not one of us has recognised you. We have no proof that you are my elder sister, though why you should seek to impose yourself on us in that character, I am at a loss to conjecture. If you are what you say, well'—Celia paused a second and then went on without blenching—'we are all acquainted with the circumstances under which Joanna left Blackhall. They were far from creditable. They were not such as would lead us to lend much credence to her final assumption of—what shall I call it?—disobedient heroism, filial virtue decidedly partial and run wild.'

'I know what you mean, Celia,' said Joanna with white lips. 'It is an awful charge to come from a sister's mouth. My mother and I went alone to Bristol, and sailed alone to New York. George Fielding here was ready to tell how and where we got the passage money. The Barings, who were here the other day, could corroborate what I have said. Dr. and Mrs. Baring were in the ship in which we went out. I never knew, I never dreamt, that anybody could think me vile like the off-scourings of the earth, till the man who had been my mother's ruin traced us so far as to write and boast in his own justification what my father had said. If he hoped to make me what I had been called, he was mistaken. Poor, unhappy mother! she never knew; I kept it from her, and we left the place; she was ready to go anywhere with me. I had been able to make myself of some use to the Barings, who befriended us from the beginning. They had faith left in human nature. They were merciful and kind, and took us with them to Adelaide. My mother died not far from them. I met my husband, who was another just and generous man, at their house, and we were married from it. If Jem likes, I can bring back Dr. Baring to-morrow to confirm my words. But very likely Jem would not

believe him, very likely he would think he was only my accomplice,' she said with a kind of ghastly smile. 'When people will not believe, they would not listen even though one rose from the dead to convince them of the truth.'

'We do believe you, Joanna, every word,' said George Fielding, coming forward eagerly: 'Jem, tell her so. You remember something of her as a girl; you must see that every word she says agrees with the old recollections of her. And think what she has done for you; how she nursed you day and night this very winter.'

'It is because of that,' he said savagely, 'because she stole on us with a false face and a false name, so far as we were concerned, and crept into our good graces and would help and save me—she who had covered us with disgrace and shame—that I cannot believe her. The Joanna Endicott of whom I have some recollection must have sunk, indeed, before she could cheat and lie.'

'Jem, Jem,' cried Kitty, 'have you forgotten? She has been truer and more honourable than we were. She is true, if ever woman was. Lady Jones,' she added, in her quaint, schoolmistress way, 'I know you will not disdain my adherence when I say that though we are not sisters in blood, I am proud to think that the law holds us as sisters, and that my little Hugh is entitled to call you aunt.'

Miles North rose from where he sat, a strongly interested listener. There was a sort of pale infallibility about him which stood him in good stead as an arbiter. 'Endicott,' he said, 'I do not apologise for speaking to you after what I have seen and heard. Besides, I am your clergyman and friend as well as hers. Your wife is right,' and by the tone in which he said it, Kitty knew that her delinquencies were forgiven. 'I have held Lady Jones in high esteem ever since I knew her; after what I have heard to-day I shall hold her in still warmer regard. She has taught a lesson to more than one of us. She may have made a grave mistake, in which case she has had to pay the penalty. But she is a good and noble woman, in spite of all her mistakes. In the name of Christian manliness and natural affection, I call on you to be reconciled to your sister.'

Jem's sole reply was to free his arm and walk away. But those who knew and understood him best viewed his action as a concession in the right direction. It was not till some minutes had passed that he justified their anticipations by saying in rough reproachful accents to Joanna: 'Why did you go and leave us, Jack? So long as we had you we had somebody to depend upon: but you took yourself off and left us in the lurch.'

Who had called her Jack last, and when was it? She dared not stop to ask herself. 'It was to save her,' she repeated wistfully. 'Oh! are you not glad, after all, that she was saved, and found a place in which she could be sorry, and die in peace?'

Celia and Tony North remained hovering for a moment on the outskirts of the group. 'I think I had better say "Ta, ta,"' Tony remarked languidly. 'I always feel myself *de trop* at a family reconciliation into which all the intervening misunderstandings and skirmishes have unexpectedly merged. Very amiable, I am sure, in the principals, and very delightful to them, no doubt, but slightly boring to the bystanders. His reverence need not look so black at me, but since it is so, I had better, perhaps, take my leave all round, and vanish from the scene at last,' making his parting bow as he spoke.

'Do you not forgive me, Celia?' said Joanna, holding out her hand to her sister, while she ignored the vanishing Tony.

'No,' said Celia coolly, 'I do not. If you are Joanna, your foolish presumptuous behaviour stripped the family of the last rag of credit which remained to it. You precipitated my father's wreck and ruin, all because, according to your own account, you must meddle; you could not wait the course of events. I approve of each person bearing his or her own burden; we are not answerable for others.'

'"Am I my brother's keeper?" such was Cain the murderer's question,' Miles North took it upon him to quote.

She went on as if she had not heard him:

'However, if you mean to atone for the wrong and can do it, I don't say I shall stand out. If family reconciliations are, as a rule, idiotic and despicable proceedings, family feuds are still more so.'

That night Lucy went to the Court with Joanna, and the sisters slept in each other's arms.

Lucy was never tired of saying, 'To think that I can talk to you of my mother, my own mother, and grieve for her, and let myself love her! Poor mother! who never ceased to love me. To think that instead of being frightened to breathe the name of Joanna, and live in dread of her appearing as some horrible woman, she should be you, of all people, dear Lady Jones, who have been so kind, who have twice saved Jem! I am sure God has been good to us, and I for one do not deserve it. But that miserable secret is off my mind, too, and you do not hate and despise me for my wrong-doing. Never, so long as I live, shall I run into debt again. I know now the full meaning of Mr. North's wonderful exhortation on the text to owe no one anything, save to love one another.'

Celia elected, to the surprise and yet in a measure to the comprehension of all present, to stay on with Jem and Kitty, who had forthwith a doleful presentiment that the skeleton at their banquet was to sit fast there for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

'WHAT WILL MRS. REYNOLDS SAY?'

It was not so. In a few days Celia came to Lady Jones and said mincingly and mockingly, 'Sister Joanna, if it is your intention to endow all of us out of the superfluity which you have been so happy as to secure in your wanderings, would you mind giving me the portion of goods that falls to my share at once, and letting me go away out of this dreary hole, and enjoy myself in my own fashion while I am still young and strong and fit for enjoyment?'

Joanna looked at the speaker in silence, not knowing what to say.

Celia took up her tale again, unmoved by the reception her petition had received.

'You need not be under any apprehension that I shall spend my substance—that is, the income you choose to settle upon me, in riotous living, like the man who asked from his father what I am asking from you. If I am a prodigal I am one of a different sort. I am wise enough to know what the riotous living would soon come to, and I can take very good care of myself, thank you. Neither need you be frightened for me following in the footsteps of Tony North and marrying him. Tony and I are very good friends, but we know each other a great deal too well for that. I am willing to put up with a stupid dozy chaperon if it will make your mind easy, or to take up my quarters in a series of dull, respectable boarding houses; but I must see the world and get my own out of it. It will be better for me and for everybody to let me go. I am not cut out for a mutual admiration society, and a group of happy homes such as you innocently propose to set up and patronise, which I dare say your friend the parson and Lucy will join by-and-by. I should be like the serpent in the garden of Eden. I don't say that you are done with me, though I don't propose to waste such means as you may provide me with, and to descend to eating swine's husks. But very likely when I am tired or have met with some reverse of fortune, or am growing old or ill, I'll turn up again like a bad halfpenny, and call on Lucy and you to nurse and take care of me, as alike your duty and your reward. In the meantime I wish to see the world, which you have seen to some purpose, Lady Jones. You had better let me have my way quietly, for I always have it by hook or by crook.'

'And what if I say I shall give you nothing, Celia?' asked Lady Jones.

'You will not be so unjust,' answered Celia promptly. 'Besides I can fall ill, and then the law will compel either you or

Jem to support me. I am not sure which has the honour. You can ask your friend Mr. Fielding.'

Lady Jones sent her sister away with all the safeguards she could devise for her. Celia's absence was an immense relief to the family. It would have been only a relief had her sisters and brother been more like her and less like themselves. As it was, they could not emulate her unscrupulous self-seeking and heartless indifference apart from her malignity. Her withdrawal was also a source of secret anxiety and hidden sorrow. It was a cause of pensive regret to Lucy, who had been brought up with Celia, and badly as Celia had treated her, could not altogether tear the old image, though its sway was broken, from her heart. Even Kitty, who had not a drop of blood in common with Celia, on whom she would have trampled if Kitty had let her, could not help wondering, especially when things were going well at Blackhall, how Celia was faring and what would become of her.

Greg Barnes came once more to the Court to grasp Lady Jones's hand; but he did more than grasp her hand, he gave her a sounding kiss on her white cheek. 'Joanna Endicott!' he cried; 'where were my eyes? I who knew all the old Endicotts better than any man left in the county. I have a crow to pluck with you, madam, for not coming to me, when the Barnes and the Endicotts have been neighbours since Trelawney's time. What was I thinking of that I did not recognise the Endicott eyes and nose, and only knew you as a moor woman? My girl, I never believed a tithe of the harm of you which envious idiots were fain to circulate. As for your poor father, it was the knowledge that he had driven you to do what you did, and that you had left him to go with her, which sent him beside himself. There, don't cry, child. Good Lord! wild Hugh Endicott was heavily punished, but perhaps he is suffered to see now that you have come back and rescued his boy Jem, for whom he had always a glimmering of consideration, are mothering little Lucy, and doing what you can for that imp, Celia. I say, do you know that my precious sister-in-law, Mrs. Reynolds is off to Bath till this business blows over? The idea that she brought back Joanna Endicott among us and stood sponsor for her is more than she can stomach, and upon my word the story is rich. Oh, dear! yes, I know you could not help it, and that it was her own fault, and she will come all right presently, when she realises that everything is cleared up and you have done well for yourself—too well for my sister Adeline to be able to give you up, though she and I had a regular row on the subject the night before she left. Yet she means well, poor soul! according to her light,' finished Greg Barnes, relenting, as was his wont, the moment he had passed what was to him a severe sentence on a fellow mortal.

Dr. Baring returned on Lady Jones's summons; but though

he was hospitably entertained by her friends and neighbours, and might say what he liked in the freedom of conversation, not one of them, and least of all Jem, ever put a question to him as to a couple of his fellow-passengers on his early voyage from Bristol, what induced him to carry them with him to Australia, or under what circumstances Joanna Endicott became Lady Jones.

Lucy was very happy, blossoming like a rose, singing like a bird, unchecked and cherished at the Court. She wore an unfailing succession of the prettiest frocks. She filled every available glass and jug with flowers in their season. She worked *portières* and mantelpiece borders with the most sumptuous materials. She embroidered dainty frocks for little Hugh. She remembered with an appropriate offering everybody's birthday, including Kitty's, and none, not even Lady Jones herself, treasured the tribute as Kitty treasured it. She caused Jem to appreciate his advantages, and to wear cardinals' slippers and Turks' caps, which there was no longer imminent danger of the bailiffs seizing.

But Lucy was not very long at the Court. Lucy, under the care of her sister, Lady Jones, protected by her from every hurt that mortal could ward off, invested by her with every advantage which wise, tender companionship, peaceful, plentiful surroundings, and the resources of an ample fortune could command, was a very different Lucy from one of the slighted, reckless Endicott girls, clinging to a precarious footing at Blackhall.

The Rev. Miles was not more timeserving than his fellows; but he had a constitutional, well-nigh womanish, regard for appearances, even while he had, as he had confessed, received a lesson to judge not by appearances, but to judge righteous judgment. He was also constitutionally prudent and foreseeing. Lucy, handsomely portioned by her sister, was not the penniless bride who would bring further pinching and scrambling for ways and means on a poor and proud clergyman.

The Rev. Miles magnanimously forgave Lucy for all the weaknesses and follies, not one of which had been committed against him; on the contrary, it was the thought of pleasing his fastidious eyes which had been one of the chief lures to the mischief. She, with a meekness equal to his magnanimity received with boundless gratitude his forgiveness for offences which he had not the slightest title to call in question. She heard his proposal to make her his wife with blessed pride and joy—almost too great for this world. She counted herself the most favoured, the happiest of girls and women, and she never ceased to think herself so. She went with him to the sheltered, sunshiny vicarage in the Cleeve, to wait upon him and worship him as the noblest, most heart-satisfying work God and the world could have given her.

Lady Jones saw her go with a mother's unselfish smiles,

prayers, and blessings, as sure as a creature can be of any earthly boon, that Lucy's happiness and honour were safe in a good man's keeping.

Lady Jones turned back with her tottering feet and her white hair into the little grey old Court, but yet she was not desolate. The burden had been removed from her shoulders also. Her father's curse seemed lifted off. She could go abroad without fear of detection. Old people hailed her, and spoke to her of the Endicotts before the days of their sins and sorrows.

Both Lucy and Jem were near her. Lucy looked in upon her sister on most days, and claimed her sympathy and help in going about the vicar's errands in the parish. No doubt Lucy was efficiently aided in her official capacity, as her husband had been before her, by Mrs. Reynolds. That lady, following the example of the immortal Miss Bingley to Elizabeth Bennet, had paid off all the arrears of civility due to Miss Lucy Endicott; and Lucy North received the atonement and accepted the aid with a simple, good faith, which made her husband and sister smile the one moment, and brought the moisture into their eyes the next. The vicar himself came to the mistress of the Court, as he had done from the beginning of their acquaintance, for rest and refreshment from his cares and worries, talked affectionately of Lucy, and treated Lady Jones as the friend he had called her.

Lady Jones was constantly to be seen driving all over the Blackhall property and the moor with Jem Endicott walking at her ponies' heads, clearing paths for them, leading them through the brooks and over the stones while he sought the counsel she was so fit to give, or talked gruffly in a lowered voice of old times. Kitty—wise little woman, with a dignity of her own—was never in the least jealous of the intimate association of these two. She was fond of Lucy, but she reverenced Joanna next to the vicar. Kitty made a good wife to Jem. She inspirited him and roused him, worked like a servant for him when he needed a servant's work and could not pay for it, brought some order out of the disorder of the accounts with which he had so long muddled himself. She read to him, induced him to interest himself in the affairs of the parish as churchwarden, and to suffer himself to be named a justice of the peace, for Kitty was a public-spirited woman with some ambition for her squire, in short, made him twice as useful, contented, and respected as he would have been without her. She was quite enough of a lady for the poor homely squire of Blackhall, who in spite of all Lady Jones could do for him was neither rich nor distinguished; and true ladies and gentlemen, like Greg Barnes with his wife and daughters, never hesitated about giving Kitty, no less than her husband, the right hand of fellowship.

When it came vividly home to Lady Jones, as it could not *fail to do sometimes*, that she was a widow, childless and infirm

in her prime, one solace—the chief of all—consoled her. There was a little Hugh Endicott who perched himself on her knee, and all unconscious of the past, clung to her neck with hugs and kisses.

George Fielding no longer avoided the Court; he came and sat there as the vicar sat, for rest and conversational delight, for intelligent sympathy with his pursuits, a knowledge equal to his own of the early histories and attributes of all the natives of the district far and near, and as keen an interest in their welfare, together with much thoughtful, well-digested information on places, persons, and modes of life which she had been acquainted with at first hand, but he was only familiar with by books or hearsay.

Lady Jones did not often speak of herself in these conversations, there were so many more interesting topics to discuss, and she still more rarely complained. But something in the talk one bright June day, when lights and shadows were scudding across the moor, caused her to tell him how she had felt when she had come back to Oxcleeve unable to walk a couple of hundred yards unaided, though it had been to save her life. 'It felt so strange, George, to see it all the same—the sky, the horizon line, the tors, the furze, the heather, the cattle, the sheep, and the geese, and I so unfit to cope with them. I could hardly believe it. I would start up and feel as if I must be able to walk and the incapacity was all a delusion. And I would walk wonderfully well for three minutes. Do you know I got out of the little carriage by myself once, and actually stumbled for that length of time up to the Lady's Gown waterfall on Black Tor? I had to try it to convince myself that I could not do it.'

'But you will walk again some day, when you get stronger,' he said, not looking at her, unable to meet her bright wistful eyes with the mixture of pathos and humour in their expression, and to recall how her agile feet were wont to skim, like the low flight of a bird, over height and hollow. Why, she had once challenged him to be at the top of Red Cap before her, and had won the challenge.

'No, never,' she said shaking her head emphatically; 'the case is desperate, hopeless. The most eminent men in the faculty of medicine have sat on the case and pronounced that there was no possibility of recovering this lost power. Indeed, they think that it is quite wonderful and very creditable to my constitution, and say that I should be glad and grateful, as I mostly am, that I have retained so much command of the nerves of motion as I still possess to move about my house and get in and out of my phaeton. I am sensible in my own body that a faculty is gone from me which I once had in perfection, I will say that, George. I was a good walker, if I could not do much else. Something has left me, and there is no help for it

save to make the best of the deprivation and thank God for what remains. I might have been blind or deaf, or tortured by pain, or prostrated by sickness. Now I have not even to wait and watch for returning health and strength, as you suggested; I am well and strong sitting here. Few people can do more than I can in a way, if I could only be content with my own window-seat and fireside, as a widow by no means young ought to be. It would be a disgrace to me to murmur; I am not murmuring, am I?'

'No,' he said, 'only you are not forty; you are five years younger than I am, and I don't consider myself old,' he reminded her in a tone that hovered between reproach and decision; then he added impetuously, 'my hearth is lonely, too. You know I once wished you to share it; can it not be so yet—now?'

'I!' she protested almost indignantly, 'a broken-down, infirm woman, while you are still young, full of life and vigour, not far past your prime. You may get a blooming girl to share your lot and make your home bright.'

'I don't want a blooming girl,' he said, scouting the idea. 'I would rather have you, broken-down and infirm as you call yourself, if you could only sit in the chimney-corner, and you know you can do a great deal more than that, than all the blooming girls in the kingdom.'

A faint colour came into her pale cheek. 'That is like the old George,' she said, putting over his hand another hand, which he took and held fast, 'that is because you are sorry for me, and would fain do what you can to make up for what I have suffered, though I made you suffer, too, in your day.

'It is not,' he contradicted her flatly, while he got up and walked up and down the room, and then came back and stood looking down on her. 'I did care for you; I don't know that you were ever fully aware how much I cared. Well, I won't say that you have never been out of my head since those days, or that I have never had a happy hour since I lost you, because I hold that there is happiness of all kinds, just as there is work of all kinds, in the world, if we will only take it and make the best of it. But I will say that I never cared or can care for another woman as I have cared for Joanna Endicott; and that to this day to have her for my wife, to get her, as she is, to share my life, would be to double, ay, to multiply a hundredfold, every satisfaction and pleasure—and I grant they are many, which are left to me.'

'No, no,' she said sadly, 'it is impossible. If there was an insurmountable barrier between us when we were young, if I would not carry the miserable experience and worse than tarnished reputation of an unhappy household established under an honest man's roof, in another home where the occupants dwelt without fear and without reproach, you may be sure I am

still less likely to do so now, when my own name has been dragged through the mire, when my own father———'

'Hush!' he said, quelling her rising agitation, 'you must not distress yourself on my account. But you are the old woman still, Joanna,' he suddenly turned upon her with lurking bitterness, 'you are as ready as ever to throw me over for a scruple, to sacrifice me and yourself to the demands of your pride and to the opinion of others—not to the opinion of anybody whose word is worth heeding, but to the verdict of idle, malicious gossips and base slanderers. When should I have paid any attention to such spiteful chatter where you were concerned? What should I care if you come to me innocent, though the whole world held you guilty? Surely we are old enough to be independent of such impertinent interference in our affairs.'

She was older and wiser, and she was shaken in her conviction though she still resisted. 'But George———' she began more timidly.

'I will have no buts,' he insisted, drawing her towards him. 'Come and make me happy, Joanna—you know you could always do that when you liked—and I ask nothing better in return than to be let take care of you, if I cannot make you happy.'

'I don't know that anybody ever thought much of doing that,' she said sadly, with one of her frank, almost girlish impulses, 'except one kind old man who took me on trust,' and she looked up gratefully at the portrait of the late Sir Benjamin, in his superfine broadcloth, hanging over the chimney-piece.

'God bless him for it. I owe his memory an eternal debt of gratitude,' said George Fielding fervently; 'but let us try if I cannot make you happy; you have never tried me, and I think I could.'

'It was not that I was afraid of,' she sighed, but the sigh died out on his loyal breast.

A silence fell between the couple. Outside, beyond the flagged pathway and the arching ash-trees over the garden gate, the geese stretched their necks and cackled and hissed over their version of the last event in the Endicott family history.

'What will Mrs. Reynolds say, George?' the woman broke the silence, with a glance of comical apprehension.

'She will say that one good turn deserves another, since it was she who brought me to the Three Foxes, where I met you again,' answered the man audaciously; 'she will not be astonished at anything which may happen when a bachelor and a widow are brought into dangerous proximity.'

'Oh! the vanity of man,' said Lady Jones.

The End.

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